2
「白嶺の幻肢虎」
下巻
星空めてお
イラスト BUNBUN
ファイヤーガール
FIRE GIRL

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Fire Girl
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by Meteo Hoshizora

Translation Group: NanoDesu

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"That was probably the first snowflake of the season. The first snowflake to fall on Nutella. Those who see the first snowflake of winter will end up becoming very happy," Homura declared proudly.
"Is that so?"
"Yes—it's a very special snowflake. That snowflake landed on you, Yuri-chan. You'll definitely become happy."
"……As if."
Kanae rejected Homura's words with a scornful laugh.

——From Chapter 18

“This makes me remember mine days as a young girl.”
“Your childhood, Subaru-san...?” questioned Misasagi.
Subaru nodded. Her gaze drifted towards the distant land surrounding the castle.
—From Chapter 16

Chapter 12

Summer rain.
It had continued falling since late last night, a welcome downpour that mitigated the lingering heat of summer.
Homura awoke early in the morning, an ingrained habit at this point. She got out of bed and absently looked at the greyish clouds above through her room's window.
Oh my…This'll put a damper on his spirits…Or maybe not, knowing him…
Homura headed downstairs without bothering to change out of her pajamas.
Her little sister Tsuyu was zealously studying for her upcoming tests with her workbooks and writing implements spread out on the dining room table.
She was quite diligent right from the start of the morning.
Apparently, she had an easier time concentrating by occasionally moving from place to place rather than simply staying in her room the whole time.
When Homura had previously tried to compliment her sister's hard work, Tsuyu had always gotten angry for some reason, so after careful consideration, Homura chose a safe and simple greeting this morning.
"Good morning."
"…Hmm."
Tsuyu nodded back while running her mechanical pencil across her notes.
Homura briefly glanced down and saw English words scribbled on the papers.
Homura went to quench her thirst with special-made barley tea. As Homura drank, Tsuyu suddenly spoke up and broached a conversation on her own initiative, a rare occurrence.
"—Are you skipping your morning run?"
"Hey…at least say it's canceled because of rain. This is legal, perfectly legal. I'm not skipping at all."
Homura spread out her arms as if to say, 'I'm safe, safe.'
True, she could run in a raincoat, but Homura wasn't that stoically devoted to running, and it would be completely pointless if she got caught up in a traffic accident while doing stamina training.
"Ah, is that so," Tsuyu replied indifferently as she went back to solving her study questions.
"Tsuyu, are you skipping prep school today?"
"Of course not. Prep school is unaffected by the rain."
Tsuyu furrowed her brow behind the bridge of her glasses, making her older sister come to a halt.
"Right. It's not like a school club," said Homura as realization struck.
"Right."
Unconsciously, Homura broke out into a smile.

“You’re trying to get into Hiyoshizaka High next year, right? With your ability, Tsuyu, I’m sure you can—”
“……”
The moment Homura mentioned her sister’s high school of choice, Tsuyu glared at her with a scary expression.
Homura chose to leave the dining room before she said any more unwanted comments and angered Tsuyu further.
But soon after, Homura came back to the dining room, pacing back and forth behind the studying Tsuyu several times, clearly uneasy. After adjusting her clothes for a while, she hesitantly poked Tsuyu’s shoulder.
“I’m going out for a bit of a stroll. Tell Mom for me, will you?”
“…Yeah, yeah,” Tsuyu replied absently.
Just as Homura was grabbing her favorite umbrella by the front door, Tsuyu hurriedly ran over and called her to a stop.
“Wait, Homura, you can’t go for a morning stroll in weather like this. Do you understand what you’re doing? Didn’t you say you were going to skip this morning because of the rain? What about your breakfast? And when are you going to be back?”
Tsuyu questioned her in a tone that was more motherly than their actual mother. Putting on an exaggerated smile, Homura answered nonchalantly.
“Hmm, breakfast is fine. I feel like toast this morning. I might be late, but I think I’ll probably be back very soon.”
“Which is it?”
“Sorry. I don’t know yet?”
“The heck’s with that?”
“I’ll call you later.”
“Hey, wait—”
Homura walked out of her home into the light drizzle outside.
Tsuyu was right, thought Homura, half-amazed at herself.
…What am I even doing?
Homura shook her head slightly while inwardly mumbling that beneath her umbrella, its blue cloth and white-lined silhouette looking like a skyscraper.
The apartment building where Touya Takumi lived was only a short hop on the train and one station away.
However, Homura didn’t feel like using the train this time for some reason, so she headed to his home on foot along the rail line in the rain.
The idea of sneaking past the ticket gate to wait for the train on the platform occurred to her…But the accumulation of such small acts seemed like it would give form to the part of her heart that she still couldn’t put into words, and that thought made her feel restless. While telling herself that she was merely taking a stroll on a whim, she walked alone across the drenched asphalt.
Ascending the hill road leading to the apartment building was actually quite easy for her. Normally, she would have long finished her morning run at this hour. Her body was filled with a faint aching feeling, as if her limbs

instinctively sought exercise. Even though she wasn't in a hurry, her legs automatically carried her forth at a quick pace.
She walked up a short stairway with the dull-colored town behind her and quietly entered the apartment building.
Before her resolve could harden, she arrived before the door to the Touya family apartment.
Uugh…I came here, but…
Homura fidgeted in front of the door as thoughts such as 'If not only the younger Touya is here, but his father, who's in the middle of a job transfer away from home, has returned, what should I say?' and 'In the first place, aren't I irrational for intruding so early in the morning?' ran through her mind. Eventually, though, she just went with the flow and pressed the door buzzer.
…Aaaaah, I pressed it! Am I stupid or something!? Stupid, stupid!
Coming to her senses at the sound of the buzzer, Homura felt her heartbeat rise and imagined her face emitting steam as the panic made the heat rush to her head. But there was no use crying over spilled milk, so she waited while nervously gulping.
"……"
But there was no response from inside the apartment. She didn't hear any reply or any sounds at all.
She rechecked the nameplate next to the door and then tried pressing the buzzer again, but there was no change.
It appeared the boy she was looking for was currently absent.
With no other choice, Homura went back down the corridor of the apartment building where she came, dragging along her drenched umbrella and her unresolved feelings.
Just as she was passing by the bicycle parking lot outside the building, Homura suddenly glanced at a spot beneath the shade of the building's zinc roof. The glint from the silver wheels of a familiar bicycle there caught her eye.
"Bicycle…found?"
Homura halted in surprise and looked at the bicycle.
His bike was still here—therefore, he must have skipped his morning exercise due to the rain as well.
But if he wasn't at home, then where…?
Homura crossed her arms and thought it over, but she couldn't come up with an answer, so she sighed and reluctantly chose to resume walking away.
But soon after, she coincidentally found the boy she was looking for.
Homura passed through the apartment building's adjoined park as she walked aimlessly. There was a small gazebo made of wood and concrete within the park. Beneath the edge of its eaves which shielded the gazebo's interior from the rain, Touya Takumi was standing there wielding a bamboo sword.

“Aah, I found the boy…”
Touya held the bamboo sword aloft and sharply swung it down as he repeatedly slid his body forwards and backwards.
He was silent as he conducted his practice swings without interrupting his pace at all. Only the sound of his sword’s tip cutting the wind reached Homura’s ears.
Touya didn’t have his glasses on while training and wore a sweatshirt and pants that were easy to move in.
“Touya…kun……”
Homura tried to call out to Touya while holding her umbrella up high, but her lips stiffened midway through saying his name. Touya hadn’t foreseen that Homura would come and stand here at the park entrance. He didn’t seem to notice her at all.
He simply kept fervently concentrating and swinging his bamboo sword—
Despite the fact that there was no one in front of him, the boy focused on a single spot in the air as he wielded his sword, as if an invisible enemy stood there.
Homura watched his side profile and the small droplets trickling down his nape as he earnestly devoted himself to his training.
……Touya-kun…
This was the second time that Homura had witnessed that expression of his, which made her feel strangely forlorn and helpless.
Unable to find any words to say, all she could do was watch from afar as he cut apart falling raindrops.
The sky grew brighter, but was still covered by clouds, showing no signs of the rain letting up.
When Touya Takumi finished his training and headed back to his family’s apartment at a light trot, he looked up in surprise upon finding Homura sitting on the ground in front of his door.
“Good morning~. You’re late, you know.”
Homura raised a hand while remaining seated and airily greeted him.
A black towel hung around Touya’s neck. His glasses were back on his face now.
“Yeah, good morning—wait, the heck are you doing in front of my home?”
“I’m just taking shelter from the rain. Bivouac, you know, bivouac. Good work on your morning training, Mr. Light-Weight Warrior.”
Touya gave his usual sigh in response.
He then held out his hand and turned over his bamboo sword to present the handle to Homura. Homura grasped the handle and tried to stand up.
…Ah…
Some of his warmth still lingered on the handle, transmitting the heat through the palms of her hands.
Touya then lifted Homura up using the sword with unexpected strength, causing her to stagger to her feet. Dusting off her skirt to hide her embarrassment, she questioned Touya.

“Err, what about that thing you usually do? Did you cancel your ‘Three-Stage Enoshima Rocket Tour’?”
“You mean my plan to go touring on my bike today? Yeah, unfortunately. As you can see, it’s raining, and it seems like it’ll be pouring all day long.”
“Then you’re postponing it till next week?” asked Homura.
Though still puzzled by her sudden visit, Touya answered her question while drying his hair with his towel.
“The second school semester starts next week, remember? …Well, maybe. I’d like to go if my schedule matches up with Doi and Moriguchi’s, but the Exploration Club has quite a full schedule of activities coming up, so I can’t say for sure.”
Homura’s gaze instinctively fell to Touya’s hand as he took out his door key from his pocket.
Touya frowned uncomfortably.
“So, why did you come all the way here, Hinooka?”
“……All right. Touya-kun, let’s go to Enoshima.”
Homura nodded with her arms folded in an exaggerated manner.
“—Huh? What? Right now?”
“Yeah.”
Touya was so taken aback that he almost dropped the key in his hand.
“You wanted to go to Enoshima, right?” said Homura.
“Like I said, it’s canceled because of the rain…There’s no point in going there by train! It’s fun precisely because I pedal there with my own feet.”
“That kind of trivial thing doesn’t matter. You have nothing better to do, right? Even if we can’t do a three-stage rocket tour, we can switch trains three times. Oh, and I’m hungry.”
“I have no idea what you’re saying.”
Touya threw his towel at Homura’s face.
Homura groaned and bent back from the impact.
“…In any case, talking too long out here is a nuisance to the neighbours, so just go home. I’m not going to let my morning turn into some kind of joke by letting you into my home.”
Homura pouted sulkily and glared fixedly at Touya.
“……Muu.”
“What—!?”
Homura threw the towel back at Touya and tried to steal the bamboo sword from his hand.
That kind of surprise attack wasn’t enough to get the better of Touya, but Homura’s persistent stubbornness forced Touya to reluctantly hand the sword over in the end.
“Hey, don’t play with my bamboo sword—Oww, that hurt.”
Homura imitated Touya’s sword form and thrust at him with the sword.
Touya skillfully caught the sword with the towel by holding it out with both hands.
“…Hey, Touya Takumi.”

“…What is it, Hinooka Homura?”
The two of them once more glared at each other.
“…I realized this after the SA, but Otomaru-kun from Kanazawa Asano said that he’s the only boy in a club full of girls, remember? Now that I think about it, it’s the same for you, Touya-kun.”
“First, put down the sword. We’ll talk after that—oww! So what? In the first place, Ameno’s a robot.”
“But she’s still a girl, you know? Even Inari-senpai, the winner of last year’s Yamato Nadeshiko contest, tends to stick around us! Touya-kun, you’re quite blessed, you know?”
“How, exactly? You realize everything you’re saying is nonsensical, right? Though your sword-wielding posture is starting to look good.”
“Thanks. So, you should suck it up and follow along with a girl’s way of doing things, get it!?”
“What kind of logic is that?”
“It’s a matter of money installments and refunds…I-I follow along with your selfish whims a lot, you know! Like with the morning runs and going to invite Inari-senpai back to the club!”
…And Homura’s entrance into the Exploration Club too? Well, I wonder about that.
“Ah? Selfish whims? I told you, the whole thing with Inari was for the Exploration Club. And the running’s for your sake.”
“Just give it up already and come with me to Enoshima! Like the saying goes, come to Kamakura[1]! Wait, should it be ‘come to Enoshima’? All right, I get it. If you’re that reluctant, I’ll pay the train fare at least. You should feel honored.”
“I’m not really happy. Going on a trip with the likes of you isn’t—Guh!”
Touya bent over holding his stomach.
After a bit of a delay, Homura realized what she had done and approached him.
“Ah, sorry…I stabbed you seriously…A-Are you okay?”
Raindrops bounced off the train window.
Touya watched the rain with a sullen expression. Homura was forcibly resting her chin on her hands on top of the armrest between their seats.
A bit under an hour after their little quarrel, Touya reluctantly boarded the local train with Homura.
“……It isn’t letting up.”
“……Yeah, it isn’t.”
Touya and Homura were sitting next to each other on the train heading for Shounan.
Since they’d boarded the train suddenly and without a plan, their breakfast consisted of some adequate-tasting sandwiches and bottle beverages they bought at a stand in the train station. Homura had been hesitant to eat in the train while surrounded by passengers commuting to work, but her

empty stomach cried out the instant she saw other passengers opening their boxed lunches, making her perseverance crumble.
The two of them ate their sandwiches while keeping their gazes down and exchanging few words.
Suddenly, the cork heel of Homura's sandal was poked by the one of the sneakers next to her.
"…?"
When she looked up, Touya was pointing obliquely at one of the seats facing them.
When she glanced in that direction, she saw a folded newspaper in the hands of an old salaryman. It was a train commute newspaper, a new kind of tabloid that had made a come-back in print after the transfer to electronic reading. Now that she looked closely, there was something familiar about the photos printed on the front page there…
That's a photo of Misasagi-senpai's father…and another of Subaru-hime? That's the photo I took! But…
The news article was from an international report on Nutella.
The headline was about illegal Nutella investigations within the People's Republic of China. It wasn't a formal-looking news report, but rather a flashy article that purposefully stirred up gossip.
Following rumors, a UN inspection on Earth had uncovered the overly long sojourns of young Chinese male investigators on Nutella and the construction of a base camp that ignored international treaties.
However, the photos that had first caught Homura's eye had nothing to do with those topics. The first showed Diet Member Misasagi from the House of Councillors. The second was a side-shot of a noble-looking lady in traditional Japanese clothing, who had become the symbol of Nutella known by pretty much everyone at this point. Homura had taken that photo herself and brought the film with her to Earth.
Based on a brief skim of the article's provocative headline, it appeared the Chinese were ignoring the results of the investigation, instead raising strong objections over the blood ties between Councillor Misasagi and Subaru-hime which had been publicly announced recently. It was quite a high-handed protest.
I really wish my photo could have been used in a more enjoyable article…
Dissatisfied with what she saw, Homura sipped her café-au-lait.
And then Homura was the one to poke Touya's sneaker, pointing at the box seat diagonally across from them.
"Hmm? …What?"
There, a baby in the arms of a woman was chewing on the necktie of a salaryman sleeping in a nearby seat.
"…Guh…"
Touya turned his face away, just barely holding back his laughter. However, Homura lay in wait for him in the direction he turned, wearing a serious face with the ham from her sandwich sticking out of her mouth.

“Bff!”
Ignoring Touya as he violently choked from the supressed laughter, Homura ate her meal with a victorious expression.
Their small trip continued as they switched over to the Enoshima rail line. Eventually the two of them reached the base of the bridge that connected to the island of Enoshima.
They stood at the beach beneath blue and green umbrellas and miserably looked at the hazy island on the ocean ahead.
“…Why is it raining at a famous sight-seeing island?” said Homura as she turned to Touya with a dissatisfied expression.
“…I told you, the forecast said it would be raining all day. In the first place, it doesn’t matter whether it’s a sight-seeing place or not; rain falls when it falls.”
“But weather forecasts often get it wrong. We came all the way here, and all we get is this lonely-looking scenery…And my feet are cold and drenched too…”
“My glasses are fogging up…It’s going to be humid this afternoon…”
Homura and Touya grumbled to themselves as they stood fruitlessly beneath the unceasing drizzle.
The silhouette of the island was hazy due to the rain and fog. They could only faintly see the viewing platform standing at the summit of the island like a stylish tumbler glass.
“…Should we head back after all?” asked Homura.
“Hah? What?”
Touya’s glasses glinted sharply as he put them back on after wiping them, making Homura shrink back.
Still, Touya sighed and spoke with a reluctant expression.
“Well…I’m not satisfied with this at all, but we came all the way here. We might as well go take a peek at the island…Otherwise it’d be a waste of the train fare you took out from the money you saved up for buying autumn clothes.”
Upon hearing that, Homura nodded happily.
“Right? All right, let’s go, let’s go. Is there anywhere you want to see or any food you want to eat? Now that I think of it, Enoshima is quite tall, isn’t it? I thought it would be more flat and level. Is that a castle on the peak? Enoshima Castle?”
Touya’s head drooped at his companion’s carefree words.
“You forcefully bring me here and now you want me to be your tour guide? Anyway, Enoshima doesn’t have any castles. It has Shinto shrines, if I remember right.”
“Don’t get so mad. I apologize for forcefully dragging you here. So, shrines? Ah, you’re right. This bridge is called ‘Benten Bridge’, right!? So the god they worship here is the goddess Benten?”
“Who knows? This is my first time coming here too.”
“Ah, is that so—Muu.”

Homura's excitement suddenly came to an end as she started to fret over perturbing thoughts. *If I remember right, Benten's blessings cover…love and passion…?*
"……No, no. Let's visit the shrines with a positive attitude, yeah."
"What are you nodding about to yourself there?"
Despite the current weather, this island was still a place of pilgrimage that had been frequently visited since the Kamakura Period. Even this early in the morning, there were quite a few travellers on the main road leading to the shrines past the bridge.
Touya and Homura laughed at the souvenir shops with dried foods and sea shells hanging from their showcases while observing the other tourists, and they climbed a steep staircase to then pass through cogon grass leading to the shrines.
"I see. Your bike tour was a 'three-stage rocket' because there are three shrines here, Hetsu Shrine, Nakatsu Shrine and Okutsu Shrine, right?"
"Don't just decide that on your own. That makes the smaller shrines further down the slope seem pitiful."
Touya retorted to Homura, who had come to a strange conclusion after passing through one of the shrines.
After proceeding down the street, they stopped at a sake steamed bun shop that had just opened for the day in order to take shelter from the rain and have a morning snack. It was then that Touya spoke up with a sigh.
"I was planning to finish my summer homework today, you know."
Homura's expression turned meek as she was mid-bite through a steamed bun.
"……Shummah fomesvook…"
"Yeah. I still have a few assignments left unfinished."
"I only have…my Math I and English assignments…"
"Wow, that's amazing. Those are the only ones you have left? Not bad, Hinooka."
"……finished out of my homework."
Touya's impressed smile immediately disappeared as Homura awkwardly averted her gaze.
"Hey. That's all you've done when summer is nearly over? You treated me like I had nothing to do, but you're the one who's in a bad situation…Well, still. What change of heart overcame you that made you do your math homework first when you're so bad at it?"
"That's…"
Now that you mention it… Homura tried to look back through her poor memory for the reason.
"I guess it's like, after hearing the stories from other mages during the SA discussion panel, I thought to myself, 'Isn't this just linear equations?' Still, I didn't really understand the details and merely listened to their conversations from the side, so it's not like my actual skill and proficiency has changed or anything. Maybe…it's because I dislike the word 'math'…"

“……Maybe so.” Touya seemed like he wanted to say something else, but he merely nodded and changed the subject. “And your English assignment?”
“Yeah, I did that one with Masano-san and the others, but Masano-san was quite Spartan. I thought it’d be easier to do it by myself and left partway through…though I regretted it afterwards.”
“Haha. If that’s how your progress is going, what are you going to do about the rest of the homework?”
“For the assignments on the basics of physics and chemistry…I’m thinking of getting help from Himekawa-san who seems knowledgeable about that. I’ve already learned how to use the chat app on my terminal, you know?”
“Haha, Himekawa has got it rough. Don’t rely on her too much, you hear?”
“And as for Japanese history…I’d like to request the help of the expert Touya-sensei…”
Homura fidgeted and twirled her umbrella nervously.
“Me? I’m in the Geography course, remember? Thanks to helping with your studies, both my history and geography knowledge has become perfect. Well, fine, I’ll do it.”
“Uuu…Thank you very much—Well, those subjects at least are fine since I can ask for other people’s help on them.”
“That’s not fine at all—Ah, I get it. Your biggest obstacle is Mori-chan’s assigned homework, right? For Modern Japanese.”
“Exactly.” Homura’s head drooped. “I have to write my personal impression on a book…and then write an essay…an, essay…”
Despite being assigned by the Exploration Club’s adviser, the homework had naturally been mercilessly handed out to Homura.
“But for the personal impression paper, I’m thinking of doing the same book as Kujou-san. I’ve already borrowed it. It’s the biography of a famous cellist. So I feel a bit motivated to do it.”
“Mori-chan will notice right away if you copy from Fujou’s paper.”
“I would never do that… as long as I’m not well and truly at my wits’ end…”
After passing through Nakatsu Shrine and walking for a while, Homura didn’t show much interest in the island’s botanical garden ahead, but she hesitated upon learning that the only way to climb up to the viewing platform that they’d seen even before entering the island was to pass through that botanical garden. Entry into the garden was charged.
Despite having declared ‘I’ll pay for everything today!’, Homura’s expression turned sour at the prospect of further charges. Seeing her obvious reluctance, Touya sighed and took out his wallet.
After they rode an elevator up to the viewing platform, Homura gazed out over the view that extended 360 degrees around her.
The rain still hadn’t let out, but the view was still spectacular from atop this viewing platform that doubled as the island’s lighthouse. There were only a small scattering of other tourists present.
“The Earth…really is small, huh?”
Homura voiced a strange comment while gazing at the far off horizon.

“Small?”
“Look, you can see how the surface and horizon curves so much from here, right? This viewing platform is a hundred meters above sea level. It’s only a hundred meters, you know? And yet the Earth curves so much you can see it from this height.”
“Is it really that astonishing…?”
“But Nutella’s horizon doesn’t look different at a~~ll to a disturbing degree even if you climb to the summit of a mountain this high, you know?”
Homura stretched out one hand at eye height and spun in place.
Her shoe soles squeaked against the sparsely populated floor of the viewing platform.
“Hey, it’s dangerous with the floor so wet and slippery.”
“I’m fine, I’m fine.”
As he watched Homura try to act tough, Touya suddenly recalled a memory of Homura on her first visit to Nutella. That time they’d worked together to reel in the cord to hoist up the antenna kite for their communicator, back when she was still an unreliable novice investigator—
“…You really are cheerful and energetic as long as you have sweets to eat, Hinooka.”
“Did you say something? —Oops.”
Touya nodded in understanding as he watched the scenery around Enoshima.
It was something that he had come to keenly feel while traversing Nutella’s mountain ridges; that planet’s horizon was only visible at a very great height. A short climb didn’t really convey the sense that you’d ascended to a high altitude there. Touya wondered just how high you had to climb in order to truly see and sense that Nutella was round like Earth.
“…I don’t think Earth is small at all, but you’re right that it’s different. You get used to it after spending a while there, but it does feel strange during your first few visits to Nutella.”
“Right, right. It was the same with the ocean horizon.”
“—The ocean? You mean Nutella’s ocean?”
Touya stared hard at Homura, puzzled over the meaning of her words.
“Ah, crap—H-Hey, I’m starting to feel hungry. Are there any tasty seafood restaurants around here?”
“We just ate some steamed buns.”
After eating at a restaurant that specialized in fresh seafood, they found the continuous morning rain had finally stopped when they came back out.
A small break of clear weather opened up over the ocean, and the far off waves shone brightly in the sunlight.
“It’s become easier to walk around now,” noted Homura.
“I don’t hate the rain, but I have to admit, this is much better.”
The two of them folded back their umbrellas which they had just picked up from the restaurant’s umbrella rack.

They didn’t retrace the shrine path they’d taken here and instead walked down a quiet backstreet that circled the island.
Some stray cats started appearing here and there, lured out by the clear weather, and as Homura tried to play with one of them, Touya suddenly asked a question.
“Hey, Hinooka. Did you find this summer vacation fun?”
“Eh…”
Homura was bewildered by that question, one which she would have had trouble saying herself. Even so, she had to raise her head and answer thus.
“Yeah, it was fun—very fun.”
Those were Homura’s honest feelings.
“—Naturally, the highlight was the SA. I chatted with Himekawa-san all night long, won against Otomaru-kun in rock-paper-scissors, and got treated to flat lemon ice cream by Ishimi-kun and the others from Nagato Fisheries. I visited Ame-chan’s room at Honba Lab and met her little sister Samari-chan too. And…I think I managed to get a bit closer to Inari-senpai as well.”
“Is that so? You don’t have to list only stuff related to the Exploration Club, you know?”
It was unknown whether or not Touya had noticed the piece of the secret that Homura had accidentally hinted at earlier, but he certainly acted as if he hadn’t heard it.
“…Ah, and I also enjoyed getting to see Kujou-san’s swimsuit! We went to the pool along with Koma-senpai and Taga-senpai. I took lots of photos there.”
“Ah, you mean that resort pool you went to. But didn’t that end up being a gathering of mostly Exploration Club members in the end? Wait, Taga-senpai went too? Eh, that Taga-senpai? I feel a bit of sympathy for him.”
“What was that? But you know, it was funny seeing Koma-senpai frolicking around too much and getting scolded by Kujou-san.”
“Haha, Kujou is always strong and firm even with people older than her.”
However, Homura felt that ‘firmness’ was actually Kujou’s way of being kind.
Homura nodded as she recalled the days of summer she’d experienced.
“—It was fun. There were lots of experiences I probably couldn’t have done if I didn’t enter the Exploration Club. This might be the first time a summer vacation has felt so short to me…since the time I went to stay at my dad’s hometown with just Tsuyu and me back in elementary school.”
“I’m glad to hear that.”
Those words struck Homura with a sense of déjà vu. She got the feeling that her father had said something similar while hugging her and her sister when he came to pick them up afterwards.
Glancing at the ocean, Homura’s head drooped a little.
“…It’s no good after all. Nanakubo-senpai told me to keep it secret, but I can’t seem to do it. Should I tell you what happened that night during the SA?”

“Is there some problem with you telling me about it? Well, whatever. I think you’ve got some good resolve, admitting that you want to say it without using roundabout methods like asking ‘Do you want to know?’.”
Seeming to resign herself after hearing Touya’s sharp analysis of her thoughts, Homura spoke up.
“…There was a *little* race.”
“You mean a race between the Exploration Clubs from each school?”
Homura nodded. She spoke while walking slightly ahead of him.
“Just as you imagined, we went to Nutella that night. Two members from each school, making a total of twenty-six volunteers. We went to a southern island on Nutella.”
“—Just as I thought. You got to see Nutella’s ocean, huh…I wanted to see it for myself.”
“Kujou-senpai said that if anyone who didn’t participate this year wants to visit that island next time, they can go on the condition that they aren’t told about the island’s terrain and characteristics…”
Homura swiftly turned around and poked Touya’s nose as he wore a disappointed expression.
“But I think that’s only if you participate in the race itself. After all, next year, we can join in as part of the race’s organizers.”
“Oh, so there was that option too. I see.”
“Right?”
Homura had come up with this idea in order to forget any personal concern over the race itself.
For next year’s race, she could just leave it all to Ameno, who should soon be capable of functioning on Nutella, and the new Seiran Exploration club members who would join then. It really was a convenient arrangement.
Eventually, Homura and Touya found a path that diverted slightly from the island’s main strolling course and led down to the beach along the north side, and they decided to walk down it.
As they walked, Homura told Touya about what had happened on the Nutellan island and Inari-senpai’s actions there. She told most of the events out of order, focusing on the memories that had left a deep impression. She promised to talk about the race in greater detail another time at the club building.
Talking about everything that happened made the excitement of the race return to Homura’s heart, but then she turned dispirited at the regret that gradually creeped up within her along with it.
“What’s wrong, Hinooka?”
“…Sorry. I guess I just wanted to tell someone about it and show off…You wanted to participate in the race too, Touya-kun.”
As Homura peered at his expression nervously, Touya shook his head calmly.
“I don’t mind. Personally, I think it’s better to be a fool who realizes and regrets their mistakes than someone frivolous who remains ignorant.”

“……Yeah…”
Homura recalled his face as he’d been swinging his bamboo sword amidst the rain—
She hadn’t even tried to glimpse into the crack within his heart then.
Homura chewed her lip, regretting having made Touya say something like ‘it’s better to realize and regret’.
“Hey…Touya-kun…”
“—Hmm?”
“……”
Did you find this summer—fun—?
She should have just asked it naturally like she always did. That was Homura’s role, yet she sadly failed this time. When she looked at him gaze straight at the ocean from the rockface, she just couldn’t do it.
The evening that day, he learned a shocking truth from Kanae Yuri at the parking lot—
But he had already risen beyond Homura’s worries.
“Sorry for making you act all considerate towards me today.”
“…What are you going to do about senpai?”
“There’s nothing I can do.”
“You’re going to give up?”
“……”
“A-Actually, I think the match is just getting starting.”
“Don’t say that so casually, idiot.”
“Sorry…”
Touya bumped a loosely gripped fist against Homura’s head. Still, Homura worked up the courage to ask another question, fully prepared for Touya to get mad at her again.
“Their relationship might have been like that for a long time now and we simply didn’t know about it…But if Misasagi-senpai and Representative Tenryuu became an official couple, would you still remain in the Exploration Club, Touya-kun?”
“Of course.”
“Oh?”
Homura was surprised by Touya’s immediate reply.
“Nutella isn’t a place that a single person can deal with alone. You never know what’s going to happen there. We learned that ourselves plenty during the incident with Suzuran. Club members have to support each other.”
Homura nodded. But that didn’t mean she agreed with all of Touya’s words.
“But…Is there any point in protecting someone who’s heading into danger of their own will?”
Touya turned to look at Homura with an unsettled expression.
“…What’s that mean?”
“Because, Touya-kun, don’t you think senpai—”
She knew it was something she shouldn’t say.

But she continued even so, even if it meant being alienated by Touya.
She had grown too close to Touya Takumi's heart and could no longer lie to him.
"Touya-kun, don't you get the feeling…that senpai, that Misasagi Mayo-senpai is being forced to participate in the Exploration Club? That she's just doing as she's told by her Diet member father…that she's trying to respond to her position, her responsibility, the bonds and ties between people, and is suffering from a harsh sense of duty…?"
For an instant, Touya's gaze turned sharp, making Homura flinch.
But that harsh gaze of his eventually swayed and vanished.
"…Maybe so. It's just like you say, I do get that feeling…though even if I directly asked senpai about it, she'd probably deny it and say it's not out of duty or obligation."
Homura nodded in agreement and listened to Touya's next words.
"—There's no way a girl who just started middle school would willingly choose to undertake Ranger training. But even if she was following orders, senpai definitely worked her hardest, wanting to be acknowledged by that splendid father of hers."
"……Yeah."
'That was her duty as one born as a child of the Misasagi family'—there was no way they could just lightly write it off like that. Homura felt the same as Touya in her feelings of protest at the irrational unfairness binding senpai, including that fiancée matter.
But what occupied Homura's mind the most right now was, for some reason, Touya himself. She suddenly recalled the photo frame of that small boy and his older sister in his room.
As Homura overlapped that young crying face of his with his current self, Touya continued to speak of his overflowing thoughts and feelings towards senpai.
"—When she entered high school, she became an investigator as if it were only natural, and she was given charge of that fortress-sized club building at our school, making her desperately work hard even if she became the only club member there."
Touya gritted his teeth vexingly.
"Compared to senpai's earnest feelings, my love-at-first-sight is truly trivial."
"…Trivial…you say…?"
—Homura's chest ached.
That sharp pain, brought to light so unexpectedly, terrified Homura. Unable to say anything to refute Touya's words, the pain penetrated deep within her heart and coiled up there, lurking in the background.
She didn't want to affirm Touya's self-derision with her silence. But he spoke up again before she could do anything, his frank tone filled with resignation.

“—She loves the Exploration Club and Seiran High…and she respects her father, so she probably always neglects herself the most. In that case, someone has to act as senpai’s ally and help her.”
But that’s not all—
It wasn’t merely a sense of duty that supported Misasagi Mayo.
That’s the feeling that Homura got, and she barely managed to ask Touya another question.
“Touya-kun…you decided to practice kendo by your own will, right?”
Just as Touya had been on the verge of settling his feelings, a bitter expression appeared on his face.
“That’s just my cheap wish to be a hero. As if it could compare to the training senpai risked her life to undergo. Still, in order to be of use to senpai, that’s the only way I can—”
Touya briefly paused to take a deep breath.
“…The one who’s truly been helping senpai is you, Hinooka. After hearing your exploits in the race on Nutella, I realized it once again. I’m no good at all. I can’t do anything well.”
His outpouring of self-derisive words pained Homura. And then…
“…Besides, kendo is useless.”
“Eh?”
Homura couldn’t believe she heard that dry murmur from Touya.
As Homura looked at him in bewilderment, Touya seemed to hesitate for a bit, but eventually continued.
“On Nutella…in that misty forest, I tried to cut down Taga-senpai. I might have hurt you and president Kamikoma too.”
“…That’s…” Homura gulped. “Touya-kun, you remember…? You remember what happened back then?”
Touya hadn’t talked about the time he’d been turned into Subaru-hime’s puppet even once until now. He had left that part blank even when he recounted his experiences to Fujimori-sensei when she was writing down a report of the incident in the Exploration Club building after his rescue.
“I still don’t remember everything…”
Touya dug his nails into his anguished face and murmured in a moaning tone.
“…But lately, there are times when I remember. The memories resurface in my mind every once in a while. When I was captured on Nutella, I spent several days in Subaru-hime’s castle. When I was alone with the witch princess. It’s only bits and fragments, but I remember it.”
“……”
Homura was speechless.
“The first time I saw it was in a dream…A dream where I was fighting with all my might in a fierce battle against Taga-senpai. The dream was vague and faint, but I can tell. The sensation that it really happened still lingers in my arms.”
Touya looked down at his hand.

Reflexively, Homura grasped that hand. The trembling feeling wasn't coming from him, but her—
"J-Just forget it already, okay? No one cares about that kind of thing! The same goes for me and Taga-senpai! It's all in the past!"
Homura desperately tried to persuade him, but she received sharp words in reply that made her recoil.
"That kind of thing? That kind of thing!? I remember it! I did the one thing I least want to do. I turned my sword against my comrades—!"
"You were being controlled back then, so it couldn't be helped. It's not your fault, you know?"
"…If I had dealt an irrecoverable wound to Taga-senpai, would you still say it couldn't be helped? Are you saying it couldn't be helped even if I wounded the defenseless Koma-senpai?"
Homura shook her head sorrowfully.
"But…then, doesn't that make it seem like you're staying in the Exploration Club for the sake of atonement…? That's no good. You know that, right?"
Homura looked straight at Touya's slightly wavering eyes.
"You should properly talk to others about this. This isn't a problem for you to shoulder by yourself. You have to probably face and talk with everyone else in the Exploration Club."
"And thus increase senpai's burdens further? There's no way I could do that."
Though he wasn't rough or violent about it, Touya threw off Homura's hand with a force that broke no refusal.
"Hinooka, please don't tell anyone about this. Not to senpai or Fujimori-senpai. I actually didn't want to tell you either, but I feel I owe you a huge debt, so I said it to you alone."
"Debt, you say… Stop it with that…"
"Still, I definitely have to talk to Taga-senpai. I have to tell him to break my arms without hesitation if I ever go crazy like that again."
"That won't happen again! Subaru-san is completely reformed now. She promised to cooperate with us."
"…If I knew this was how it was going to turn out, I would never have started kendo."
Homura desperately tried to stop Touya as he became even more obstinate on the matter.
"I know you don't really think that. I saw the kendo championship trophies in your room!"
"…So what? My sword techniques had no effect on Yukiwarimaru."
"There's no way to know whether or not it'll be useless in the future. I-If Taga-senpai ends up going on a rampage next, who will stop him? — Besides, you're wrong. The one who's truly been helping senpai is you, Touya-kun."
"—You're wrong."

“I’m not! Remember what Miss Chandra said at the SA club president meeting? She said she was thankful that you came back safely. The one who felt that gratitude the most was definitely senpai! After senpai and I returned to Earth by emergency transport, she was clearly feeling very down…Her face looked so sorrowful I thought she wouldn’t manage to recover from it. Fujimori-sensei and I were worried for you too, but it’s because you’re here in the Exploration Club now that senpai is okay.”
“You’re wrong. I’m the one who caused that in the first place.”
“Get it through your thick head! You’ve already helped us plenty—”
“I told you, you’re wrong! To help senpai, I have to—”
Touya’s words tampered off there, but Homura could clearly tell what he was trying to say.
Touya’s true thoughts and feelings—
I have to get stronger—
But won’t I end up hurting someone again like that—?
Homura painfully understood the agony that immobilized Touya as he was trapped by that contradiction.
……
After a long silence, Touya eventually murmured with a sigh.
“This is no good…”
“…Yeah.”
“We’re so stupid.”
“Yeah. We are.”
“If even we end up quarrelling like this…”
“Yeah…If she saw us seriously fighting like this, Misasagi-senpai would surely be sad. Really, really sad. And when she’s already troubled by the whole issue with Inari-senpai too.”
“Yeah. We can’t let the Seiran Exploration Club break up any further. Ah, we really do look like idiots here, don’t we? Even if we uselessly spin our wheels in a place like this, we won’t advance a single step.”
“……We really do look like idiots.”
Those words were similar to self-hatred as well, but it still showed that he was reflecting on himself in a slightly more positive manner, so Homura was relieved somewhat.
For the time being, they chose to soothe their wearied hearts by gazing at the seagulls flying over the ocean for a while. Eventually, Touya spoke up and asked a certain request of Homura.
“…Ah, by the way,” said Touya while scratching his head and averting his gaze. “If you have any photos of Kujou and Koma-senpai at the pool, please show them to me.”
“Heh?”
“No…I’m just saying, if you happened to take any photos…”
Homura was simply stunned for a short while, but then she snickered.
She took out her cellphone and dangled it in front of Touya.

“Hmph, I did take some picture. In that case, I’ll offer them to you in exchange for helping with one page of my homework for each photo. How about it, Touya-sensei? Well?”
“Ah? …You little, you’re willing to sell out your friend and senpai!? Are you a demon!? A demon of Enoshima!?”
“If you want, how about I add in photos of me as a special bonus? Well?”
“…Guh…Fine, I get it. I’ll take those of you too while I’m at it. Photos can’t talk, after all.”
“Wha…What’s that supposed to mean!? Idiot! Die!”
Chapter 12 END

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

(1) Here, the original expression used is “Come to Kamakura City!”, a metaphor often used to say “there’s a major emergency”. It originates from the Kamakura Period, when the government would gather the samurai throughout the land in Kamakura when an emergency occurred.

Chapter 13

Afterwards, they boarded the local train from Enoshima and headed to Fujisawa Station through the main rail line—
Homura remained silent and sulky on the train ride home.
She kept roughly playing with the white Rubik's cube in her hands, her mood failing to improve.
In addition, she completely ignored anything Touya said, perhaps an indication of just how much she cared about his earlier comment.
Nonplussed, Touya reluctantly changed his plans to go home immediately and instead dropped by the shopping street in front of the station.
"It's pretty crowded everywhere."
The sky had completely cleared up at this point and a refreshing after-rain wind blew through the traffic circle in front of the station. Even so, Homura still kept glaring at Touya with narrowed eyes, creating a gloomy atmosphere that weighed down on him.
"—Hmm."
As they stood on the pedestrian deck in front of the station, Homura pointed at a Western confectionery shop that just came into view. It also doubled as a café inside. *It's already decided that I'm paying, huh?* With a mental sigh, Touya obediently went along with Homura's wish.
Just as they were about to head over to the shop—
Homura bumped into a woman who had just walked out of the hotel near the station.
"Wah!"
"Ah, sorry."
The tall woman nimbly dodged the collision and bowed her head in apology. Homura frantically apologized as well.
"No, I'm the one who should apologize…Wait, Mori-chan?"
"…Gyah…Kuh…"
The instant Homura said her name, the woman stiffened and let out a stifled shriek.
"W-Why?" She stared at Touya and Homura in turn.
She was wearing a white lace blouse and a knee-length pleated (Eh!?) skirt. The outfit was accented by a mesh belt that loosely adorned her thin waist.
With such a wildly out-of-place outfit, she didn't look like the teacher they knew at all, but…
"You're Mori-chan, right?" repeated Homura.
"Fujimori-sensei, what are you doing in a place like this?" asked Touya, cornering her further.
"…Y-You've got—you have the wrong person!"
Desperately shaking her head and denying their words, Fujimori, no, the young woman who happened to be passing by frantically hid her face and

swiftly walked away. Homura and Touya watched her leave with flabbergasted expressions.
"…'You've got—you have'? Does Mori-chan really think she managed to deceive us with that? Do you think she's here to meet with someone?"
"I didn't see anything. I didn't see anyone in a situation that just screamed 'What have I done!? This is the blunder of a lifetime!' or anything like that."
"—Hmm? That's unexpectedly tactful of you, Touya-kun."
Homura jokingly acted impressed at Touya's choice to feign ignorance.
"Yeah. I have no idea which Fuji-something-or-other-sensei she was, but this is the first time in a while I've seen her wearing something besides jeans outside of school. And she was even carrying a handbag. It really suited her. She didn't have to run away like that."
Well, this was Fujimori-sensei they were talking about—she came out from a normal city hotel that had absolutely nothing suspicious about it. They tried peeking into the hotel lobby through the front glass door, but they didn't see any familiar faces inside.
Setting that unexpected encounter aside at Homura's urging, the two of them walked through the door of the Western confectionery shop.
Homura's attention was caught by the brass doorbell that rang at their entry. Touya was relieved that she seemed to have forgotten her earlier anger at him after bumping into Fujimori.
As they were being led to their designated seats by the store clerk, Homura's gaze happened to catch a certain vacant table.
A white porcelain tea set lay on the table. Pieces of cute decorative paper with arrow feather and orchid patterns were scattered around it along with various handmade origami.
Next to the table was an electric wheelchair lying folded away to the side. It was the kind of half-robotic wheelchair that had recently gained popularity, built so that the riders could freely move on and off the seat themselves and it could automatically put itself away into a suitcase after being used. And as for the origami…
A…frog?
A still unfinished origami frog on the table looked like a tadpole on the verge of adulthood with its hind legs sticking out the back.
As they waited for their cake order, Homura immediately figured out who had made the origami.
She heard a familiar voice from the direction of the restroom, and she just happened to meet that person's eyes at that moment. They were bright and twinkling green eyes.
"—Homura-san? And Takumi-san too? What a coincidence, meeting you guys here!"
The one who happily called out to them was none other than Ameno. She smiled at the two of them while helping an old woman walk. The old woman holding Ameno's hand turned to question her.
"Are they acquaintances of yours, Ameno-chan?"

“Yes!”
After Homura and Touya moved over to sit with them at the old woman’s invitation, Ameno introduced them.
“Let me introduce you. This is Akado Tsuwako-san.”
“Akado-san? Then…”
Homura reacted to that last name, which was still fresh in her memory.
“Yes. She’s the grandmother of Akado Fukiko-san from Honba Institute’s research lab.”
The old woman was the grandmother of Akado-san, the assistant working at the research lab with Toneri. The woman calmly looked at Homura and Touya as she greeted them.
“Nice to meet you, Touya-san, Homura-san. So you’re Ameno-chan’s comrades in the Exploration Club.”
“Yes,” the two of them affirmed with a nod. Now that they looked closely, they could see that her features resembled Akado-san’s.
She also had a sharp gaze despite her elegant demeanor.
However, her knees and back seemed to be weakening from old age, so she apparently had trouble moving around by herself.
“And Takumi-san is my classmate too.”
“My, is that so?”
With a broad smile on her face, Ameno proudly recounted the details of her school life to the old woman, making her look like a loving grandchild despite their mismatched appearances.
“Fukiko-san helped us recently,” said Touya as he greeted her.
“Did she now? Fukiko has been quite lively since transferring to her current workplace. But, funnily enough, these days I’m being assisted by the very Ameno-chan that Fukiko-chan is raising.”
“Ah, you’re right.” Homura nodded in understanding, recalling Ameno’s helping gesture earlier. “Your caregiving form was almost picturesque, Ame-chan. You looked like a real natural at it.”
“Yeah. The guys in our class would be surprised if they saw you, I guarantee it.”
Ameno waved her arms frantically.
“Not at all. Actually, I’m the one who’s always been taught things by Tsuwako-san.”
Though she tried to be humble, she was clearly embarrassed as she covered her face from the sudden praise.
Just the other day, Homura and Touya had glimpsed the Caregiving Robot model room at Honba Institute.
Apparently, Mrs. Akado was one of the people who had volunteered in response to the lab’s in-house recruitment of test subjects from among employee families, for the sake of conducting initial study trials into the application of robotic caregiving.
In order to obtain basic data for mass-production caregiving robots, test subjects were invited to the model room and received caregiving from the

robots as a practical test. Ameno had learned how to physically touch and assist human movement properly as one of the caregiving robots there. It was a valuable experience for Ameno, certain to aid in her Exploration Club activities as well.
“That’s not all. Tsuwako-san used to work for Honba Institute too, right?”
Mrs. Akado nodded.
“Although, saying I ‘worked for the lab’ might be an exaggeration. It’s more like I was employed there as an outside contractor. It was quite a long time ago.”
“At Honba Institute? What kind of work did you do?” asked Touya with keen interest.
“I drew up plans. My job description was machinery drafting, though you might not be able to imagine the kind of work it involves from the term alone. I used tools like Drafter and T-Square to sketch designs,” explained Mrs. Akado while miming the gesture of running a pen straight across an inclined desk with her hand. “Though right before I retired, we did start using CAD software.”
“Then you made motorcycle designs!?” exclaimed Homura.
“No, nothing that extravagant. But I did design plenty of individual motorcycle components.”
While discussing various topics with Mrs. Akado, including how Akado was taught by her grandchild Akado Fukiko, they managed to hear anecdotes from her past.
Having originally started as an office worker at a machine factory, she started learning draftsmanship on the recommendation of the people around her and soon came to be valued highly for her methodical and quick workmanship, apparently leading her to move around various factories. Eventually, she settled down at Honba Institute and worked there full-time with breaks for maternity leave until her thirties. The name of Honba Institute’s founder also came up here and there as she recounted her past.
“I’m greatly indebted to Honba-san, especially since it’s thanks to working at the institute that I met my husband. Work there was always hectic due to a lack of personnel, but I managed to work hard there until I gave birth to my second child.”
Suddenly, Mrs. Akado looked next to her with a joking expression.
“But I never thought I would end up being helped by Honba-san’s *child* too.”
Realizing Mrs. Akado was referring to her, Ameno’s eyes gleamed happily. Her proud smile was dazzling under the afternoon sunlight.
“Ehehe. The truth is, when you guys were visiting the lab last week, I was paying a visit to Tsuwako-san at the hospital after her operation with Chiayu-san. Sorry I wasn’t there to guide you guys around.”
“Heh, is that so? In that case, congratulations on getting discharged from the hospital!” said Homura.
“It wasn’t a major operation, you know. I wouldn’t have minded if you prioritized your friends, Ameno-chan.”

“I couldn’t do that! Tsuwako-san is my precious grandma, after all!”
“How sweet of you, Ame-chan. You made the right call,” agreed Homura.
“Yeah. Fukiko-san did a great job of showing us around the lab, so it wasn’t a problem—By the way, how’s your health after the operation, Tsuwako-san?”
“The operation went quite well. I feel a bit better now. Ameno-chan sure has some polite friends.”
Touya looked at her wheelchair with a slightly worried gaze, and perhaps perceiving his concern, Mrs. Akado complimented him on his kind-heartedness before returning to the subject.
“Since I went through an operation and all, I have to avoid moving my body as much as possible for the time being. And since Ameno-chan went out of her way to spend time with me, I’m having her help me out.”
“Ask me for help whenever. I have no intention of falling behind the mass-production models~”
Ameno clenched her fists with resolve.
“—By the way, was Mori-chan with you two earlier today?”
Ameno nodded at Homura’s question.
“Yes. She came with us here by car. She should already have returned by now, but she seems to be late.”
“If the two of them are having a lively conversation, then that’s wonderful.”
“—Haah.”
Mrs. Akado wore a satisfied expression while Ameno replied in a somewhat doubtful tone.
Mrs. Akado’s words solidified Homura’s confidence in the guess she’d formed earlier.
“Could it be that Fujimori-sensei…went to a marriage interview[1] today?”
“How did you know that!? And after Chiayu-san strictly forbade any information leaks!”
Ameno’s eyes widened in shock.
“A marriage interview? Fujimori-sensei?”
Touya’s surprise was equal to Ameno’s.
“I’m the one who is surprised here…A-After all, Mori-chan is…”
Before Homura could say anything further, Ameno’s next words came flying in from an unexpected angle.
“I’d say you and Takumi-san are the real surprising ones, going on a love-love date together. Did you go to Enoshima?”
Touya choked on the tea he’d just sipped. Not paying him any mind, Ameno continued with an eager expression.
“If only Chiayu-san could learn from your assertiveness, then she wouldn’t worry Tsuwako-san so much.”
Meanwhile, Homura’s face turned deadly serious and her hand flashed in front of her as she waved it in denial so fast its movement couldn’t be caught with the naked eye.

“No, no, no, that’s a misunderstanding,” Homura swiftly replied. “I’ve already decided that my heart belongs to Kujou-san.”
Ameno nodded somewhat uncertainly, and Homura proudly put her finger to her chin as she explained.
“Today I went to give a pep rally for the troubled boy Touya-kun. After all, Nutella is an environment that makes it easy to go on a rampage, so—guhoh!”
Releasing that strange gurgle, Homura face-planted on the table.
Digging his elbow into the side of Homura who’d been saying whatever she wanted, Touya desperately tried to change the subject.
“B-By the way, what’s with those origami?”
“Ah, Tsuwako-san and I made these while waiting for Chiayu-san.”
Upon closer look, there were indeed various kinds of origami on the table. There was a frog, a deer, a rhinoceros, a lion, and a panda made from paper that was white on one side and black on the other.
“It’s just a pastime I have as a way of stopping myself from going senile,” explained Mrs. Akado.
“Tsuwako-san was the one who taught me how to make origami,” added Ameno.
“Heh,” remarked Touya in admiration.
Each origami was so elaborately folded that they could easily be called works of art, clearly deviating from a mere pastime to prevent senility.
“Chief Toneri was also quite obsessed with it for a time, you know?” said Ameno. “He mumbled something like, ‘This could serve as a breakthrough to a renormalized cosmological theory.’”
“*Sky*-kun shows interest in pretty much everything,” remarked Mrs. Akado. “But he didn’t keep at it that long in the end.”
“Oh my—Ah yes, before I forget.”
Mrs. Akado took out a small yet thick envelope from her purse.
She then took out from it a small piece of origami that fit snugly in her palm.
“Ameno-chan, you’re finally able to travel to and explore Nutella like you’ve always wanted, right? I’d like to give this to you as a protection charm. If you like…and if it won’t get in your way, please bring it with you.”
“……!”
Ameno widened her eyes at the light green origami that Mrs. Akado casually held out to her.
It was an origami frog, like the kind that Ameno often made in her free time at the club building. It had a cute form that could even bulge its cheeks. However, it differed slightly from the ones Ameno made in that it had a small baby frog riding on top of the parent frog’s back.
“Wow, it’s so cute~” exclaimed Homura innocently upon seeing it. “How nice, Ame-chan. You got a wonderful protection charm.”
After receiving the origami, Ameno stared at it intently.
“T-This is amazing…How did you…?”

“…Ah? …Huh? Wait, it’s…all folded from a single piece of paper?”
Touya also noticed the frog’s secret. He brought his face closer to the origami on top of Ameno’s palm to get better look.
“Well, who knows? I’ve always been good at using my eyes for fine and delicate things, so if I was a bit healthier, I’d like to try putting another one on top.”
Mrs. Akado smiled with a bit of pride.
Ameno bowed her head to her.
“Thank you very much. I’ll think of this as Tsuwako-san and bring it with me to Nutella.”
It was only a folded piece of paper, but Ameno preciously wrapped it within her palms, deeply moved.
“Speaking of frogs, Chiayu-san seems to have finally returned. I wonder how things went with her?”
In the direction that Mrs. Akado was looking at—was Fujimori, standing shyly at the entrance to the confectionery shop.
She noticed the table they were seated at but seemed to be hesitating to come over. Her face was dejected, wasting the makeup she had went out of her way to put on. Just where and how long had she killed time after parting from Homura and Touya earlier?
Hmm, it’s a real waste, but…
After eating the last slice of strawberry tart, Homura clapped her hands together.
“All right, Touya-kun—let’s pretend we didn’t hear about the marriage interview.”
“Isn’t it already obvious we know after seeing us here with Tsuwako-san and Ameno?”
“No, no, we didn’t hear anything! If we get up and leave now, Mori-chan might pay the bill for this cake order, you know?”
“That’s extortion.”
Realizing Homura’s plan, Ameno leaned forward.
“In that case, how about we pretend I ate your shares?” suggested Ameno.
“That’s pushing it a bit too much,” said Touya with a wry smile.
Naturally, Homura was very interested in the results of Fujimori-sensei’s marriage interview, but even she felt hesitant to delve that far into her teacher’s privacy.
Besides, Homura could just ask her about it the next time they met.
After seeming to finally resign herself, Fujimori entered the shop, and Homura and Touya got up to go greet her.
“Thanks for the meal, sensei.”
“It was delicious, sensei.”
“Y-Yeah… eh, what’s this? A bill for a cake and black tea order?”
Fujimori wore an astonished expression as she was handed the bill by the two of them.

She immediately perceived the intent of her two cheeky students. She glared at Homura bitterly.
“You guys have finished your summer homework, right? …Especially you, Hinooka…”
“*Gulp*.”
“I’m going to remember this if you miss the deadline by even a single second…”
Homura cringed as she was threatened by Fujimori, whose atmosphere was completely different from usual.
“I-I’ll do my best…”
“As I thought, you haven’t even started yet—Hurry up and go home!”
“Roger~” And with that, Homura and Touya obediently departed.
A while later, it was finally time for Homura and Touya to part for the day after getting off the train, as the thick shadow of summer enveloped the train platform.
Touya and Homura took different paths home from here. Homura would go straight through the ticket gate and walk home while Touya would switch train lines to head to the next station over.
Homura casually killed time as she stayed with Touya while he waited for the next train.
As she gazed at the evening sky that was starting to turn orange, Homura recalled a certain matter that had been bugging her for a while now and asked Touya about it.
“‘Sandu…leak’? What language is it from? How’s it spelled?” asked Touya in request of more details.
“I don’t know.”
“…Figures. As usual, you never bother to research things on your own, Hinooka.”
“Hahaha, the weather’s really cleared up now.” Homura let out a forced laugh as she turned to look at one of the station’s shop stands. “Is it a bread shop or something? Or maybe an old shop that specializes in pastrami sandwiches that’s been around since the Ero Period?”
“…Did you really hear Toneri-san say that word?”
“He really did ask me about it—‘Do you have any recollection of this work?’, he asked.”
Touya took out his cell phone and did a web search with the spelling that seemed most likely. He immediately found a probable answer.
“Sanduleak…is probably a person’s name. It’s a Romanian family name…It’s spelled ‘Sanduleak’ in English. I don’t know much more than that.”
“A person’s name? That’s nowhere near enough to figure it out,” complained Homura.
“But there’s a certain phrase that pops up with overwhelming frequency on web searches—‘Sanduleak -69° 202’.”
“…Sixty-nine two hundred and two?”

Touya showed Homura his cell phone. The display showed several nearly identical trimmed images.
“Pictures of some galaxy? No, wait, this is a nebula?”
“Yeah. To be precise, it’s an emission nebula—the ruins of a star. The remains of a supernova.”
“The ruins of a star? Ah, that thing. A star’s gravesite, like what’s written in the textbooks.”
“—Not that. Though they both have to do with supernovas.”
Touya nodded while reading the entries he looked up.
“This is in the Dorado constellation. It went supernova in the last century… It was several years before we were born.”
“Hmm. In that case, it seems even more unrelated.”
The star called Sanduleak was originally a blue super-giant 168 000 light years away from the solar system, with twenty times the mass and a hundred thousand times the luminosity of the sun. Or so Touya read from the online database.
“‘—A neutron star should have been born at the center of the supernova, but it has yet to be discovered by visual observation…’ Heh, I wonder where it went.”
Homura half-heartedly listened to Touya’s explanation.
She looked closely at the images in question on her phone after Touya forwarded it to her.
“Heh…But, when you look at it closely, it kinda resembles a ring.”
This time Touya was the one to peek at Homura’s cell phone.
“Now that you mention it, you’re right—A ring, huh?”
Touya brought his face close to the cell phone while knotting his brow in thought, and Homura involuntarily blushed at his close vicinity to her.
Soon after, Touya’s train arrived, and Homura saw him off after hurriedly getting him to promise to help her with her homework.
Thus, the last bit of Homura’s summer vacation passed by in a busy blur.
Chapter 13 END

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

(1) Marriage interview: a Japanese traditional custom where a single man and woman are introduced to each other to talk and consider the possibility of marriage. It is usually arranged through the participant’s families or a professional matchmaking organization.

Chapter 14

The new school semester.
Homura had somehow managed to make it to the start of the second semester.
Things had been quite topsy-turvy for a bit as she dragged Touya and Himekawa from Tomakomai Denpa High into helping with her summer homework, but that was all in the past now.
With her head still filled with the relaxed haze of summer vacation and the exhaustion of finishing all her homework in time, practically none of the first day's lessons managed to enter her brain. Despite this, by the end of the day, Homura was restless, as her body desperately craved sugar so much she couldn't control herself.
Homura reluctantly declined Kujou's offer to go home with her and instead headed to the Exploration Club building. Today was the first day that club activities resumed as well. The always attentive Ameno had surely prepared some junk food and rare sweets of questionable taste for their club meeting today.
In the lounge of the club building idolized by other students, I'll lie down on the floor mat of the night-duty room and spend time decadently as much as I want while waited upon by a beautiful robot girl. Just imagining it filled Homura with enthusiasm and glee.
After Homura thus explained her aspiration for the first day of the second semester, Kujou simply said the following before departing: "If Ameno-san was mass-produced, the number of people like Hinooka-san would increase and the world would probably become a peaceful place—Goodbye."
World peace…? How'd she reach that idea…? Homura puzzled over Kujou's parting remark while stepping into the junction that connected buildings across the school grounds. She caught sight of several female upperclassmen grouped together in front of the sports clubs' building ahead.
"Oh? That's—"
She saw a familiar female student surrounded by the female upperclassmen.
"Inari-senpai…But who's that next to her…?"
Just as she had declared right before the start of summer vacation, Inari had returned to school at the start of the new semester.
Standing next to Inari was a second-year female student with a plump body. She was watching over Inari from a step behind her. Just like Inari, she showed no signs of being intimidated in the face of the upperclassmen surrounding them. In fact, her expression was even more brazen and confident than Inari's.

A friend of Inari-senpai?
Still, the leading character at the center of this commotion was definitely Inari.
Upon closer inspection, all the upperclassmen there were the club presidents of the school's various female sports clubs.
Homura had often seen their faces while walking through this hallway and on the blog that the student council secretary Kurama published.
Ah…No. They're the former club presidents, to be precise.
Before the start of summer vacation, almost all clubs should have finished choosing their new club presidents from the younger members, so all the upperclassmen here should have already retired from their positions.
There were upperclassmen present from the Track-and-Field Club, Gymnastics Club, Swimming Club, Ping-Pong Club, Tennis Club, and even the Volleyball Club and Basketball Club, whose members were a head taller than the others. These were the clubs which gathered the especially lively and active girls within the school.
Seeing these faces, Homura managed to quickly grasp the situation.
T-They're here to invite Inari-senpai to their clubs…and so many of them at once…?
Indeed. There was no way they could ignore someone with as much all-around sports potential as Inari.
For an instant, Homura felt somewhat proud at seeing Inari's popularity, but then…
…No, no, no! Isn't this really bad!?
Homura frantically looked around in search of help, but unfortunately there was no one else around.
"Have you thought about joining a new club, Inari-san?"
"Your condition is good after finishing your rehab, right?"
Inari responded to the passionate questions of the former club presidents with a firm attitude.
"My body is completely fine now. Sorry for worrying you all," she said with a polite bow of her head, causing her wavy hair to sway. "But I can't join a club. If a second-year like me joined midway, it would be disrespectful to the other members who have been participating seriously. And most importantly, I'm behind in my studies, so I have to focus on that for a while —Therefore, I don't intend to join a club for the time being."
Ooh…Phew…
Hearing that, Homura patted her chest in relief. Suddenly, her gaze happened to meet that of the chubby senpai next to Inari. But she showed no particular reaction to Homura.
"I came here because I thought I should give a proper reply to your offers. Though I did receive several messages and phones calls from many of you over the summer—"
When they heard Inari say that last part, the former club presidents exchanged looks and quietly exchanged heated remarks.

“Hey! Didn’t we promise that we wouldn’t steal a march on each other!?”
“In the first place, why is the Tea Ceremony Club even here?”
“It’s fine, isn’t it!? We’re always willing to welcome new members even from second year students.”
A tall senpai from the volleyball club spoke up then.
“But Inari-san, your grades weren’t all that good from the start, right? I asked the teacher in charge of my club about it. In that case, wouldn’t it be far better to aim for a university recommendation by working hard to reach a national tournament in a sports club?”
“Guh!”
That comment apparently hit the bull’s eye, as Inari flinched a little.
“Ah, well, it’s true that my grades are at the bottom end of my year’s mid-ranks! Actually, I’m practically in the middle of the top of the bottom ranks, but still!”
“Aren’t your grades in everything besides English and phys-ed catastrophic?” remarked the senpai from the tennis club.
“You’ve already researched that far!?”
“Fufufufu.” The third-year girls mercilessly drew closer to Inari.
The former club presidents sidled up to her while licking their lips like serpents encircling their prey. In Homura’s eyes, the small-statured Inari looked like a baby fox trembling while cornered against the wall.
Naturally, this wasn’t something that Homura could ignore as someone else’s problem.
This is bad…At this rate, senpai will be swallowed whole… Uuh, no one’s coming to the rescue…
Giving up on reinforcements, Homura approached the group from the side.
“U-Umm, dear senpais…” The former club presidents simultaneously turned around to look at her. “Pardon me for interrupting you all at the climax of your scouting, but…”
“Homura? That you?” Inari belatedly noticed her presence as well.
“Yes. Despite my inexperience, I would also like to participate as a representative of the Exploration Club, but… umm, we the Exploration Club were the first ones to mark Inari-senpai with our spit… so I assert that we have priority, I guess…?”
Homura weakly made her appeal as she licked her finger and placed it on her head.
However, the former club presidents merely faced her with narrowed eyes, as if they were looking at an unfortunate child.
“……”
Inari was also gradually starting to frown as she looked at Homura.
In the end, everyone ignored Homura and went back to their forceful attempts to invite Inari to their clubs.
It was then that the girl next to Inari spoke up.
“Technically, the Exploration Club is part of the university recommendation system too, you know.”

Everyone including Inari froze up in surprise at those words. Even Homura, a member of the Exploration Club, widened her eyes upon hearing that for the first time.
“The jurisdiction over the Exploration Club will be changing over to the Nutella Development Bureau of the Cabinet Office starting next year, so the treatment for members taking university exams will be greatly improved. It will have a recommendation quota for public universities as well as private ones, so it’d be much more advantageous to join them than any of the sports clubs.
“S-Seriously? —Nyacchi?”
Inari turned in surprise to look at the chubby senpai, who nodded nonchalantly.
—Nyacchi-senpai? Who is she, and how does she know that?”
Even Homura hadn’t known about this shocking information. This was the first time she had heard of the “Nutella Development Bureau” outside of when it was announced at the SA. The full implications of its establishment hadn’t really clicked with her back then.
Nyacchi-senpai pressed Inari further.
“Well, though I say recommendation, your grades are really at rock bottom right now, especially in terms of your attendance rate. First, you have to work hard on regular exams and get back your knack for studying.”
“Ugh, yes…”
Inari cringed.
Even after being refused by Inari and receiving unexpected information from Nyacchi-senpai, the former club presidents still showed no sign of giving up. One of them spoke up.
“At least answer this. Inari-san, do you intend to return to the Exploration Club?’
“……”
The moment Inari was asked that, Homura heard a familiar voice approaching from down the hallway. This was the worst possible timing.
What kind of bad luck was this—?
The long-awaited reinforcements were the student council president Rokujizou and the president of the Exploration Club, Misasagi Mayo-senpai.
Misasagi and Inari’s gazes met for an instant.
And then Inari turned back to the former club presidents to answer the question.
“…No way. I’d never go back to the Exploration Club even upon threat of death.”
Homura’s heart hurt when she heard Inari declare that once more.
Inari looked at Homura through a gap between club presidents and continued speaking.
“I want to be a journalist in the future. So I’m seriously planning on going on to university. I won’t say that club activities will definitely be a hindrance to that, but it’s not what I feel that I should be doing right now. You can’t

become a good journalist on passion alone. I have to obtain a good basic education in order to have a wide field of view.”
Homura couldn’t tell whether or not Inari’s words reached Misasagi’s ears. Misasagi and Rokujizou kept heading towards the Exploration Club building without paying any mind to Inari and Homura. The former club presidents watched their backs from behind with tense expressions.
“Then, I’ll be excusing myself now.”
Inari bowed her head to the former club presidents and then turned to leave in the company of Nycchi-senpai.
“See ya, Homura. And don’t look so down.”
“…Yes…See you tomorrow.”
Homura saw off Inari. She then turned to resume heading to the club building, but without noticing it, she had been surrounded by the former club presidents who’d remained behind.
Eh? Eh? What? Homura immediately became on edge.
Just as she was about to try and escape, the former president of the Basketball Club grabbed her shoulder firmly.
“U-Umm, I’m not really a target for drafting, so—”
As Homura began to fear that she was going to be invited to their clubs too, she was hit by a completely unexpected question.
“By the way, Hinooka-san. Is it true you killed a Nutellan in battle?”
“—Eeh!? Killed!?”
More questions came at her in quick succession.
“It was posted on an Exploration Club watcher blog. It said that the Seiran High Exploration Club were the ones to make first contact. So, is it true?”
“I heard there’s going to be an all-out war with Nutella soon, but is that for real?”
“No, the Nutellan is apparently an ancestor of Misasagi Mayo-sama.”
“No, what’s with the ‘sama’ there?”
“They attacked from the basement of your club building, right? Isn’t that bad? Can you win?”
“Touya-kun can take care of the enemy with his sword skills, right?”
Homura desperately shook her head.
“T-Those kinds of rumors are going around? No, I hadn’t heard any of that. In the first place, none of it is true! We only encountered one Nutellan. It was announced in the news, remember? Please confirm the facts from trustworthy information sources!”
Eventually, Homura was freed from the former club presidents.
While keenly feeling the need for journalists that were knowledgeable about the facts on Nutella, Homura passed through the front entrance of the club building. Next to her was Fujimori-sensei, who had joined up with her earlier.
“You really saved me back there, sensei.”
“You really had me in suspense there. Why do you always run your mouth off like that?”

“It’s fine~. By the way, thanks for the cake.”
“D-Don’t change the subject!”
They were heading straight to the usual lounge. Waiting there were Misasagi-senpai, Touya and Ameno. The only unusual presence there was student council president Rokujizou.
“Welcome, president.”
“Sorry for intruding like this~” Rokujizou breezily replied while making what looked like passes at sexual harassment on Ameno.
What worried Homura, though, was Misasagi, who looked slightly depressed as she sat next to Rokujizou. Homura was only able to tell because she had finally gotten used to perceiving the subtleties of Misasagi’s expressions.
“Good work during the SA, everyone.”
Today marked the resumption of club activities.
Fujimori-sensei was the first to speak. Meanwhile, President Rokujizou remained seated where she was.
The president had her arms wrapped around Ameno while resting her head on top of the robot girl’s lap in the same mischievous posture as when Homura had first entered. Ameno seemed troubled by it, but no one showed any sign of stopping the president, so she just sat there blinking her eyes with a confused expression.
Only Homura glared at the president with narrowed eyes, clearly thinking ‘Hey, I wanted to get a lap pillow from Ameno…’ while swiftly popping Alfort chocolates into her mouth from the prepared plate on the table. Due to that distraction, she didn’t pay attention to main points of the conversation as usual…
First, Fujimori-sensei spoke about their next mission.
“Your next mission on Nutella isn’t to explore unknown territory, but to create a new base camp with assistance from Hiyoshizaka High. You’ll be borrowing land near the princess’ castle to establish it on a lease. Secret negotiations with Princess Iotsumisumaru are also included in your mission.”
…Does the meaning of the word ‘lease’ have some connection with Dad’s sparkling wine? While resisting the urge to ask that out loud, Homura silently listened.
“We got the consensus of each school during the SA conference, but we’ve yet to start on any concrete work plans. Things are going to get busy, so prepare yourselves. Once we’ve solidified our plans, we’ll have to meet with Hiyoshizaka High right away to discuss things.”
“About that—” interjected Touya.
“What is it, Touya?” asked Fujimori.
“Inari-senpai should have experience from making the old base camp with Misasagi-senpai. In that case, I think we should request her help on this.”
“Unfortunately, I haven’t received any notification from Inari that she’ll be returning to the club.”

“…I know. But wouldn’t it be all right if we asked her to cooperate as an outside helper?”
Fujimori crossed her arms.
“You don’t mean bringing Inari along with you to Nutella, right? You’re referring to things like consulting with her on the base’s construction plans and learning from her accounts of past failures in that regard, correct?”
Touya nodded. After letting out a small sigh, Fujimori turned to Misasagi.
“How about it, Misasagi? The decision rests with you.”
“…If Touya-kun, thinks it, is necessary, I don’t, mind.
“If you’re opposed to it as the club president, then I—”
“I have, no reason, to be, opposed, to it. If you, can get, Inari-san’s, approval, please go, ahead.”
Both Homura and Touya could tell that Misasagi’s reply was underlain by a stiff tone. Misasagi still refused to soften her attitude towards Inari.
Homura was actually surprised that she had accepted Touya’s request at all. It appeared her stance was to only oppose bringing along the unwilling to Nutella.
She still refused to explain the fundamental reason for her stance on that, though.
“Ah, also.”
Fujimori resumed the discussion.
“On your next mission, you’ll also be accompanied by an Exploration Club member from a school besides Hiyoshizaka. It’s the vice-president of Nagumo High’s club, Oozore. You guys should remember him from the SA where he served as the assembly moderator.”
Touya and Ameno nodded. Naturally, Homura did as well. Oozore-senpai had saved her when she’d been attacked by a shark in the lagoon on the Nutellan island, after all. The overwhelming display of magic he’d shown then was still fresh in her memory.
Putting on a pseudo Helping Hands comedy skit[1] by grabbing Ameno’s hand and raising up in the air, Rokujizou interjected.
“Can I ask something? I know Oozore Misaki myself. He’s the Wizard of Nagumo High. Why is he going all the way out to Seiran High’s designated district?”
“‘To ensure continue fairness and impartiality’, I suppose you could say,” replied Fujimori. “The first discovered Nutellan human, Princess Iotsumisumaru—those requesting to meet with this Nutellan princess aren’t limited to the Exploration Clubs of Japan, but pretty much all investigator organizations throughout the world. First, we have to confirm with Subaru-hime herself whether or not she’ll actually accept these requests to meet.”
“Haha, I see. So it’s inconvenient to have Mayo in charge of the negotiations? Because Mayo’s related by blood to her and therefore might guide Subaru-hime’s intentions?”
“If you want it put bluntly, yes,” affirmed Fujimori with a resigned expression. “This can’t be helped. There are just too many people

requesting to meet her. We can't just do whatever we want here. Since that's how it is, the most we can do is to show consideration so as to remove as many future problems as possible."
At that point, Fujimori turned back towards Misasagi with a meek expression.
"But, of course, we're not leaving you completely outside of things, Misasagi. Rather, we need you to participate in the negotiations too as the person in charge of the on-site base camp. It's just that the higher-ups can't possibly gain Subaru-hime's trust by leaving the decision-making to others."
"Yes. I, understand," replied Misasagi with a firm nod.
Seeming a bit relieved upon hearing that, Fujimori's expression softened.
"The truth is, I'm just relieved that Tenryuu isn't the one accompanying you guys," Fujimori wearily admitted as her shoulders slumped.
"I get the feeling that Representative Tenryuu and Subaru-hime might unexpectedly get along well, though," commented Touya.
"Eh, why?" asked Homura.
"No, it's just a feeling. Don't you feel the same?"
"No, not at all," said Homura with a shake of her head.
Next to them, Ameno spoke up to Fujimori.
"Why isn't Representative Tenryuu coming himself? He's the official representative of Japan's Exploration Clubs, isn't he?"
"Nagumo High's Exploration Club has its own mission coming up. He's leading the mission as their club president."
"I see, so it's a matter of the right person in the right place," said Ameno with a nod.
"…That's not it. It's a harsh, life-risking mission. It's his duty to take charge of it as the club president. 'Right person in the right place' only applies to routine work where you know what needs to be done beforehand."
"Life…risking?"
Hearing Fujimori's answer after that hesitant pause, Ameno recoiled in shock. Behind her, Rokujizou spoke up next.
"Then Oozore Misaki is like a diplomat that's been given complete discretionary authority?"
"His task and responsibilities aren't that huge. He's just taking charge of the preliminary investigation."
"Seems like coordinating everything is going to be a real pain," said Homura.
"Pretty much. More importantly, though…I just hope that they'll exclude that idiot Saho from the list of participating members from Hiyoshizaka high," murmured Fujimori with a frown.
Touya smiled while leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed behind his head,
"Oozore-senpai, huh? Working with him makes me feel a bit nervous, but it sounds fun in its own way. Hinooka, you should use this rare opportunity to learn magic directly from the Wizard."

“I’m more than just a ‘bit nervous’, you know… But you might be right. I should prepare myself for lessons from him.”
How rare. How admirable of you, Homura!
“Umm, by~ the~ way~” Homura suddenly raised her hand. “Why is Rokujizou-senpai here today?”
The president, who’d been resting her chin on Ameno’s shoulder, raised her head and blurted “Oh, me?” in surprise.
“Fufu. The truth is, I’m thinking of joining the Exploration Club.”
“Eh?” “Hah?”
Homura and Touya were startled by the unexpected declaration.
“You want to join the Exploration Club, Takara-san!?”
Ameno also turned to look at her with wide eyes.
Rokujizou restrained the robot girl’s head with a grin.
“Sorry, just kidding. I am technically the student council president, so I want to know what kind of effect the activities of the Exploration Club will have on the students of this school.”
Fujimori nodded in agreement, apparently already informed of this.
“That’s right. That’s why Rokujizou comes to check up on things here during important moments each semester. Though I have to admit, you’re the first student council in this school’s history to show this much interest in the Exploration Club.”
“Wahaha. There’s no way I could miss the chance to see the few rare scenes where Mayo glitters within school.”
Rokujizou met Misasagi’s eyes for a moment and shrugged in jest.
Then, she returned her gaze to Homura, who somehow seemed dissatisfied.
“Ah, please don’t misunderstand. When I say the ‘students of this school’, I don’t mean just the students *outside* the Exploration Club. You guys are included in that as well—Mayo, Homura, the kendo boy—” Rokujizou pointed to each of them in turn. “And you too, Ameno-chan,” she added at the end while giving the robot girl a tight hug.
“President, that posture ruins your big and cool declaration.”
Touya reproached her in reaction to being called ‘boy’, but Rokujizou ignored it as she continued speaking.
“When you get overzealous about Exploration Club activities, you tend to forget the obvious facts, right? Remember, you guys are also students of Seiran High.”
“S-Sorry. You’re right,” said Homura.
Rokujizou’s words resembled those someone else had told her before. That’s right, school life was also naturally a part of their reality.
“By the way, Ameno-chan is much heavier than she looks,” remarked Rokujizou.
“…Eh, that’s…well…it’s true, but…”
It took a moment for Ameno to fully process and blush at Rokujizou’s unexpected comment.

“Err, I’ve already been equipped with Nutella-use battery cells in preparation for the mission…so it’s true that I’m heavier than usual…”
Ameno huddled upon herself apologetically on top of the president’s lap.
“Ah, President Rokujizou, that’s robot harassment.”
“Yeah, robot harassment.”
Even Rokujizou couldn’t help yielding when both Homura and Touya reproached her like that. “Sorry,” she said while bowing her head.
“What the heck is robot harassment?” asked Fujimori with a dubious expression.
“It’s exactly what it sounds like. You should be careful not to do it either, Mori-chan,” said Homura.
“Right!?” Ameno fervently agreed.
“You got who’s harassing who backwards there. Besides, there’s no way I’d ever do anything towards a golem that could be misunderstood like that.”
“There you go again, Chiayu-san! I keep telling you not to call me a golem! And don’t just register me as ‘Class: Thief’ without my permission either! Geez!”
After the meeting concluded for the time being, Homura went up to the rooftop of the club building.
The afternoon wind had begun to stir up on the rooftop with its prominent silver astronomical observation dome, where the heat of the summer sun still lingered.
During the meeting, it had been proposed that they spread out shock absorbent mats on the rooftop while the members were out on missions, in light of what happened during their emergency withdrawal last time.
Laying out the mats was assigned to the standby group who would remain in the club building, but a certain person who clearly lacked enthusiasm in the proposal had spouted off quibbling arguments like “Too troublesome”, “There’s no way you’d be able to specify your return destination in that case anyway”, “By that logic, we’d have to lay out cushions all over the school”, and “More importantly, you should be careful of everyday traffic accidents instead”.
That person who’d spouted off those complaints was standing on the rooftop ahead of Homura.
Homura walked up next to her, who was currently gazing absentmindedly at the activity grounds of other clubs.
“Sensei?”
“Hmm?”
“Make sure to invite me to the wedding ceremony, okay?”
“……Ceremony, you say…?”
Fujimori leaned even further over the handrail at those words, looking almost on the verge of falling over.
“Who’d you hear that from? Is tailing people a bad hobby of you two?”
“Now, now. It was just a coincidence that we ran into you there.”
“……Coincidence?”

Fujimori sourly glared at Homura's clear and composed face.
"…Ameno said something about you two going out on a date that day, but is that true?"
"That was just Ameno-chan joking around. You should know how impossible that is, sensei."
"Well, true enough."
"So, what strange turn of events made you to suddenly go to a marriage interview? And what were the final results of it?"
As Homura stubbornly pressed her teacher for answers, Fujimori gloomily looked back at her.
"Strange turn of events, huh? —Well, the final result was 'Luck wasn't with me this time', I guess you could say."
"So the marriage interview ended in failure, huh…?"
Fujimori shrugged.
"The guy had no intention of considering the idea from the start. The moment we were alone together, he bluntly said 'I have no plans of marrying anyone'."
"Eeh, that's so rude!" exclaimed Homura with an indignant pout.
"Well…I felt the exact same way, so I can't say he was completely in the wrong there."
"…What, really?"
Thank goodness. Homura was surprised to realize that part of her felt relieved at hearing that.
"Were you perhaps introduced to him through Akado-san? And you couldn't refuse when she begged you to meet him?"
"That obvious, huh—Yeah, I promised her a while back. She really is a terrible person. When I went to visit her at the hospital, she asked me to listen to a single request of hers if the operation was successful."
"Y-Yeah, that's not the kind of thing you can just refuse," said Homura with a sympathetic smile.
"That old matchmaker…I mean, Akado Tsuwako-san said she wanted to introduce me to an old friend of hers. I got really panicked when I realized how swiftly she set it all up. Well, I somehow managed to fulfill my obligation to her… I had no intention of taking the interview seriously myself, but when the time finally came, I ended up wanting to dress myself up even if just for appearances' sake, and I got really depressed when I was actually rejected point-blank like that."
True enough, it was hard to imagine Fujimori's cute appearance that day from her current jeans outfit.
"—So, what is it you really want to ask me?"
Clearly, Fujimori had realized that Homura was just stalling for the real question she wanted to ask. In deference to her teacher's frankness, Homura immediately withdrew from her gossip mode and cut to the chase.
"It's about Inari-senpai."
"Hmm? …If that's what this is about, should you call Touya here too?"

“N-No, it’s fine. He’s still all pumped up about the talk of the new base camp downstairs, after all.”
Homura could vaguely tell that she shouldn’t let him hear this conversation with the way he currently was.
If Fujimori gave her a satisfactory answer, that might merely increase Touya Takumi’s worries, after all.
“Umm…If it’s fine for President Rokujizou to come to the club building, wouldn’t it be fine to bring Inari-senpai here too? She naturally has the qualifications to do so.”
“Inari doesn’t want to, though.”
“Then we just have to bring her forcefully.”
“So you’re going to try asking her this time? …That’d be a difficult feat. I had to really pull out all the stops to make her come to the SA. Her presence was a big help there.”
Homura had been surprised when Inari suddenly appeared at the SA. She had deferred from asking just what kind of transaction had gone on between her and Fujimori-sensei to bring that about, but it was surely the result of a sense of trust and debt between the two of them from the year and a half they spent together in the club[2].
Though hesitant, Homura still expressed her thoughts.
“I’ve always thought that Inari-senpai quit the Exploration Club because of some personal discord with Misasagi-senpai. That the incident where they were stranded on Nutella in the past was the trigger for it. But now… after having seen Inari-senpai interact with the other senpais at the SA, I get the feeling that she harbors some kind of quiet anger towards the Exploration Club itself…But I don’t know what the source of that anger is.”
“You’ll understand eventually.”
“That’ll be too late! So please answer me this, at least. You might be a teacher, but I’m asking you as my senpai in the Exploration Club as well.”
For a while, Fujimori simply stared at Homura in silence.
“……”
“Wh…What is it?”
“No, I was just thinking how nice it would be if you were that serious and diligent when it came to writing essays and book reports too. You really have no confidence when it comes to writing. It’s because you just use obvious template essays that they end up being boring.”
“Sorry…”
“It’s fine. Besides, when you ask me like that, I can’t refuse.”
After letting out a small sigh, Fujimori resumed speaking.
“Back when you saw the presentations of the other schools at the SA, you said this: ‘It was refreshing and interesting seeing the hard work of various different people.’”
“Yes.”

“Inari’s fox ears heard their presentations like this—‘Get it? Don’t do this. Don’t do that. You know what’ll happen if you break the promises we made, right?’”
Homura lowered her eyes and shook her head. “I don’t…really get it.”
“In other words, those presentations didn’t encompass the full efforts of the Exploration Club members. ‘We worked harder than what we showed there. We’ve advanced much further ahead, but we made do with just this. We compromised because we feel conscious of the eyes of our teachers and the officials—’ That’s how it sounded to her. Inari dislikes that pressure to conform to expectations.”
“It didn’t seem that way at all to me… I just thought it was all so amazing. Everyone seemed to be doing their best and having fun. That’s how it sounded to me. Is it because I have the ears of an ordinary person?”
Homura raised her palms against her head and gestured to make fake fox ears.
The sight of that made Fujimori burst out laughing.
“It’s only natural that you and Inari have different perspectives, and there’s nothing wrong with that. But…Inari might have grown a bit too close to being an adult.”
“An adult?”
“Even if there are inconveniences on Nutella, you can’t blame others for it. Things like rashness, unreasonableness, procrastination and obstinacy all comes around back to you. You have to take responsibility for your own actions. Nutella teaches you that right away—and that pretty much makes you an adult in all but name. That’s the kind of place Nutella is. But the adults of this country don’t acknowledge that. They still treat you all as minors. Because they’re afraid.”
“—A…fraid? Why? Of what?”
Homura was shocked to hear that high-schoolers like her were feared by adults.
“They have to protect their official stance. ‘We adults have guided and supported you all plenty.’ When young investigators feel uneasy or lost on matters, they solemnly interject and decide things based on their own experiences. Though they try to share the burden, in the end, they abandon the investigators and say ‘Whatever happens after this is your mistakes’… even though the investigators know that without being told.”
Mistakes… That was the phrase used in the concluding speech of the SA presentations.
Back then, Councillor Misasagi had said, ‘We’ll eventually have to face mistakes.’
But what had left a greater impression on Homura at the time were Inari and the person she had harshly flared up against on the SA stage.
When the mood of the audience had turned sour over the issue of Subaru-hime, Representative Tenryuu had tried to appease everyone, but Inari had pressed him and asked ‘Are you just a cheap signboard?’.

Back then, Tenryuu had flinched for appearance's sake, but he had somehow seemed happy as he looked at the angry Inari.
Representative Tenryuu and Inari-senpai, huh… Which one of them is more of an adult, I wonder?
Homura still didn't know the answer to that.
Fujimori sighed.
"Though I talk so self-importantly, I'm pretty much the same. I'm a director, after all. I created this setup along with everyone else. I do feel responsible for it."
"Sounds rough."
"You're really acting like it's completely someone else's problem."
"It is. I have my own troubles, you know?"
"Troubles, huh…?" Fujimori glared at her out of the corner of her eye, but Homura ignored it with a cool expression.
Fujimori-sensei, one of Japan's first investigators, had her own troubles as well.
But Homura could neither sympathize with her nor imagine the hardships she had tasted. Even just dealing with the one-year-older Inari-senpai was too much for her at the moment.
Fujimori returned her gaze to the school grounds below.
Homura rested her chin on her hands over the handrail next to her and murmured quietly.
"'Chieko says that there is no sky in Tokyo[3].'"
Fujimori faintly nodded at those casual words and gazed up at the sky.
"…Yeah. Inari might have become unable to see even this everyday sky."
"……"
In that case—
What about Misasagi Mayo? thought Homura.
She seems so close yet far away… What does she think of the current Exploration Club? The sky that Misasagi Mayo has seen in her thick and close-packed eighteen years of life is surely different from the one we see. She's our senpai at school, but also a hard worker who has zealously trained since childhood, the daughter of a Diet member promoting the pioneering of Nutella, and also Representative Tenryuu's fiancée—
Even so, Homura didn't want to think of Misasagi as a person living in a different world from her. She felt a small yet unwavering certainty that they both lived in the same reality.
Homura recalled how senpai had saved her when she slipped and fell down the cliff.
That incident had only lasted several minutes, but it was an unforgettable experience for Homura. Misasagi had hugged her and tried to calm her down, but it was obvious that her heartbeat had been pounding even harder than Homura's back then.
Senpai was scared too back then—

Just noticing that had relieved Homura’s unease more than anything else could.
“All right,” said Homura while enthusiastically raising her arms. “So, how about we have a competition to see whether your marriage hunting succeeds or Touya-kun and I bring back Inari-senpai to the Exploration Club first?”
“I’m not doing any competition. Well, regarding Inari, there are some things you guys can do precisely because I couldn’t. I’m counting on you guys.”
After that final remark, Fujimori headed back downstairs ahead of Homura.
Now alone on the rooftop, Homura raised her arms up high once more and even threw some strange kicks through the empty air to pump herself up.
Chapter 14 END

marriage, huh...?

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

(1) Helping Hands: a comedy skit with two comedians on stage, where one hides beneath a coat hung over both of them to use their hands as if they belonged to the person in front of them.

(2) See the chapter end image of Vol 2-1 Chapter 5 to see the truth of what happened for a laugh.

(3) This is a quote from a Japanese poem previously mentioned in the first chapter of Vol 1-1. Check that chapter to understand the meaning behind this phrase.

Chapter 15

And so, a week passed by in a flash—
The Exploration Club members had safely transported to Nutella from the Transport Room in Seiran High's club building.
This was Homura's first time back to Nutella since she went to the uninhabited island during the SA, and Touya and Misasagi's first time in over two months.
It was currently just past noon.
Normally, they would already be off towards their destination by now.
But currently, Homura and the other four investigators with her were still on standby at the base camp.
From now on, this place would be called the *former* base camp, since their mission this time was to head to Subaru-hime's castle and set up a new base camp nearby.
In light of that, they had brought a bulky amount of tools and materials with them this time.
For the time being, the massive bundle of luggage had been piled in one place, emphasizing its sheer volume. Just the thought of how they would have to lug all this across the mountain trail made Homura wish to avert her eyes from the pile. She prayed that the engineers back home would implement a light-weight cycle car with an engine as soon as possible.
Still, they had some new members to help share the heavy luggage for this mission.
"How is it, Takumi-san?"
"—Okay. I've managed to check off all the points on the initial response checklist Toneri-san gave us."
"There's nothing abnormal, right? There's nothing wrong with my body, right? All clear!"
Ameno jumped up and down to express her joy.
As usual, the Bagel stretched across the blue sky of Nutella, which had entered its fourth autumn season.
Ameno kept looking up and sighing in admiration at it without tiring of the sight.
Since Homura had experienced it herself before, she gazed upon Ameno's innocent reaction as if looking upon her past self.
Touya had battled against the discomfort of Transport Sickness as he filled Ameno's operation checklist, but had since regained his vigor and smiled happily at her.
"It's almost scary how well things seems to be going," he remarked.
"Please don't say that! There was a long string of failures up to this point. Now I can truly go exploring with you all!"

“Yeah. I’m happy for you, Ameno. Congratulations,” said Touya.
“Everything’s all right, then!? Congratulations, Ame-chan!”
Homura happily congratulated Ameno from a short distance away.
“Yes! It’s all thanks to Tsuwako-san’s protective charm!”
“Now we can go exploring with all the members of the Seiran High Exploration Club!”
“Yes! Yes!”
…However, there was a senpai present who threw cold water over this touching moment.
“What we’re doing this time is more like grunt work than exploration, though,” murmured a female Exploration Club member in a nonchalant tone next to Homura.
“I suppose…”
“What? There something ya wanna say?”
“No… not really.”
“Sorry I’m not Vice-President Oozore.”
“I-I didn’t say anything like that at all… N-Nanakubo…senpai…?”
Nanakubo stared at Homura with narrowed eyes.
“I could see it in your eyes. Your smoking eyes were so obvious you practically said it out loud.”
Instead of Oozore Misaki who was originally supposed to accompany them, Nanakubo Sae was the one to come to Seiran High.
She was a second-year student at Nagumo High. Unlike Touya, whose nearsighted vision improved on Nutella, she was apparently the type that still required glasses even after transporting.
Just as Nanakubo herself had frankly pointed out, she was someone that Homura had a hard time dealing with, but the senpai had still unexpectedly helped her a lot during the SA.
“It’s fine, not like I came because I wanted to. Really, why did I end up joining you Seiran guys on baggage duty?”
“I-I’m very grateful for your help… and for allowing us to economize on the magic energy for the transport…” That was the sincere truth. “We had so much luggage that one of us might have had to go back to Earth to bring it all, but thanks to the incredible capacity of your payload[1], we managed to bring it all at once. Misasagi-senpai was talking about how happy she was about it.”
“……”
Despite how Homura had used all of her small amount of knowledge to flatter her, Nanakubo didn’t react. Homura peered at her curiously.
“Senpai?”
“Ah… Yeah, it’s not a big deal. If you want to thank me, do it in cash. How nice it must be for Seiran, being so rich. The exact opposite of our school which cuts the budget on everything.”
“No, umm, we’re not really living in luxury or anything… Though our club building is amazing, I admit…”

Nanakubo was clearly disgruntled as she complained in her usual way.
Homura cringed in response.
“But I heard that President Tenryuu was the son of a wealthy and influential family… He’s like a character straight out of a story, isn’t he?”
“That has nothing to do with our club itself. The president is the president, while the rest of us are commoners. We have to get up super early and take the Nozomi train[2] to school. Just getting to ride a maglev train is a luxury.”
“I suppose so.”
Nanakubo sighed after getting that off her chest.
“By the way, I’ve been wondering since earlier, but what exactly are you doing? Are you helping President Misasagi with something?”
“No, I’m just searching for something…I guess?”
“Searching for something?”
“Well, you see…”
The current base had been made by reformatting old ruins left behind by ancient Nutellans.
Due to Suzuran’s extreme mischief during their last mission here, the stone ruins’ first floor and first level of the basement had tragically collapsed.
Right now, they were using the armory room, which had barely survived the onslaught, as a makeshift shelter against the wind and rain.
This time, the plan was to use everything that could be used, including not just the new materials they brought with them, but also the various tools that were already here at the base camp.
Homura had (officially) been looking around to see if there were anything usable in the collapsed rubble. However, they hadn’t had the time to sort through the wreckage during their last visit, so most of the implements had been left exposed to the wind and rain and no longer seemed usable.
Nanakubo seemed to have guessed the reason behind Homura’s search.
“That mentality not to waste things is a splendid mindset as a commoner, but the stuff around here is no good anymore. Everything’s covered in moss.”
“What about the wonderful oil lamp over here…?”
“It’s covered in rust. Might as well just make a new one.”
“Yeah, but…”
Just as Nanakubo had said, this camp was already in the process of becoming one with nature and returning to being the set of castle ruins it originally was.
Homura sighed as she looked around and once more keenly realized how swiftly time flowed on Nutella.
—Nutellan time flows six times faster than Earth’s.
That also represented the enormous gap that separated Homura and the others from Subaru-hime.
A year had passed on Nutella since their last visit.

They had taken Suzuran, Subaru-hime's only family, and left the Nutellan princess in complete solitude here. That guilty thought pained Homura's heart.
At that point, Misasagi-senpai came over to the two of them. She was carrying a big cooking pot and drinking water tank in her hands.
"Hinooka-san, it's about time to prepare lunch."
"Ah, right, roger that! Err, we need to make enough for eleven people, right?"
As Homura trotted over to her to accept the pot, Misasagi tilted her head with a worried expression.
"…We might need to make enough for fourteen."
"That much!? Well, I guess there is one super big guy in the group."
"I'll prepare the fire, so please go and draw the water. Can I request your help as well, Nanakubo-san?"
"…Well, guess it can't be helped," replied Nanakubo.
While carrying the pot and heading towards the watering hole near the camp, Homura peered at Nanakubo's face from the side with a knowing grin.
"…What is it? Don't look at me. It's creepy."
"Nanakubo-senpai… Is this your first time seeing Misasagi-senpai's Trans appearance?"
"Y-You've got a sharp eye there."
Nanakubo was embarrassed that Homura had noticed how surprised and conscious she'd been upon seeing Misasagi's beautiful transformed appearance.
When the two of them came back from the watering hole, the camp had grown quite lively.
The Exploration Club from Seiran High's paired school, Hiyoshizaka High, had arrived.
"Wah, everyone is already here!? Welcome!"
"Hey, hey, don't shake the pot. The water will spill out."
Homura reflexively speeded up and Nanakubo hurried after her.
The Hiyoshizaka group had arrived on Nutella six hours ahead of them in Earth time and then immediately headed out from their base camp to reach here.
They had arrived just past noon after a day-and-night's journey on Nutella. Their arrival was at the exact time that the two clubs' presidents had planned out beforehand.
Like Seiran High, all the members of the Hiyoshizaka club were participating in this mission.
With club president Kamikoma Sara at their lead, their members consisted of the vice-president Taga Taichi, Momoyama Masami-senpai, Hayase Ryou-senpai, Saho Akiho and Kanae Yuri, for a total of six.

The members from Seiran High, the leading actors of this mission, consisted of club president Misasagi Mayo, Touya Takumi, Hinooka Homura—and Fujimori Ameno, who had come to Nutella for the first time.
Nanakubo Sae from Nagumo High had also come along, making for a total of eleven investigators participating in this mission.
Having all these investigators here was extremely reassuring to Homura, and deep down she was actually just as excited as Ameno.
Touya and Ameno ran over to the just arrived Hiyoshizaka group, letting out cheers of amazement.
“What a huge spotted deer!”
“Is that an endemic species of Nutella!?”
Taga-senpai nodded.
Taga unfastened the animal carcass that had been tied to his backpack and let it drop to the ground.
It was a male deer. Its distinguishing characteristics were the spot that covered its fur from back to hip, whose color didn’t fade even in winter, and its antlers which were slightly small for a deer. The deer itself wasn’t all that big. It looked practically tiny next to Taga-senpai.
Looking at the bloodstains on the deer’s torso, Touya asked a question.
“This wound—did Hayase-senpai kill it?”
“Yeah, that’s right,” said Hayase while holding his bow in a mock shooting pose. “We’re imposing on your hospitality with so many members, so I thought we should at least bring a gift to make up for it. And we made it just in time for lunch, too.”
“Though I’m not sure about having this kind of feast so early in the day,” said Kamikoma with a wry smile.
“No, no, we have to build up our stamina for nighttime.”
“To do what, exactly?”
Kamikoma gave Saho Akiho a whack on the head as he merrily cut in with his jesting.
“Thanks for that! Well, that aside, leave dressing and preparing the meat to me. I’ve already finished draining the blood from it.”
Saho proudly took out a knife from a leather case.
His ears, which had drooped after Kamikoma’s whack, quickly turned erect and brimmed with energy again.
“Great. Please teach me how to dress meat too,” asked Touya enthusiastically, before suddenly turning around. “What are you doing, Hinooka? You come over too.”
“Uuuu… Just leave that kind of thing to Akiho-kun.”
Homura tried to back away, but Touya and Saho caught her.
His tone full of pride, Saho taught Homura how to dress and prepare an animal carcass with great detail.
The carcass was quickly cut and dressed by the knife in Homura’s hands.
Homura kept letting out piercing wails at the sensation throughout the entire process.

As Nanakubo watched the noisy trio of first-years with an exasperated expression, Kanae Yuri gave her a piercing sidelong stare.
Her red eyes gleamed challengingly.
“…What, so Oozore-san wasn’t the one who came?”
“That you there, Kanae? Your face is depressing as usual.”
“There’s no point in my having come here if I won’t get the chance to be taught by Oozore-san.”
Kanae yawned as if to express just how disappointed she was.
“Hah. Our vice-president doesn’t have that kind of free time. By the way, isn’t your personality different here too?”
After a hectic yet satisfying lunch, the two Exploration Clubs set off from the camp.
Each of them carried a portion of the massive quantity of materials they were bringing with them. Taga-senpai, who had especially exceptional strength, carried a mountain-sized load. Naturally, Homura wasn’t exempted from baggage carrying duties.
Though her load was modest compared to those of the male members, she still had to walk carefully or risk slipping and losing her balance on the mountain path. The idea of merrily running around was absurd in this situation.
However, Ameno, despite being much smaller than Homura, was easily carrying the same amount of baggage as her, causing Homura to look at her enviously.
“Are you all right carrying all that, Ame-chan? Isn’t it heavy?”
“I think I could actually carry a lot more… but Misasagi-senpai said, ‘You’re forbidden from overdoing it.’”
“Yeah, she’s got a point. It’s easy to fall over until you manage to get used to the different sense of gravity here.”
“Yes! I’ll make sure to be careful!”
Ameno nodded repeatedly, moved by the guidance she received from the older Nutellan forerunners. As someone who was visiting Nutella for the third time herself, Homura was delighted by her reaction.
“Yeah, there are people whose feet slip over nothing, after all,” commented Touya.
“Touya-kun… That’s something you’re not supposed to bring up…”
Touya’s quip made Homura turn dejected. “Now, now,” comforted Ameno.
Homura looked up at the sky, feeling a sense of excitement and fun like a torch that refused to be extinguished in the depths of her heart.
This was her first time being surrounded by so much noise and commotion within the vast expanse of Nutellan nature, which usually filled her with a sense of isolation.
Even so, Nutella’s ring, the Bagel, remained unchanged as it stretched across the heavens.
A magical celestial body, which maintained its ring-like form through the shepherding of various satellites.

The closer it came to noon, the closer Nutella's sun neared the Bagel in the sky.
In the clear blue sky, the Bagel, whose glitter was quite faded compared to the summer season, looked slightly further away than last time.
Along the way to their destination—
Nanakubo explained the circumstances behind why she ended up replacing Vice-President Oozore as the Nagumo High participant for this mission.
Naturally, the Hiyoshizaka High members hadn't heard anything about it until they joined up, but even the Seiran High members hadn't yet heard of the complicated circumstances involved.
"Our club president Tenryuu had to hurriedly depart to China on official business due to Meivelle Chandra's personal nomination. He went to participate on a joint investigation of ruins discovered within the region on Nutella that China is in charge of… but that's just a pretext.
"The real reason he went is to conduct an inspection on the actual state of China's exploration missions. They refuse to accept an official inspection group, so our president was sent instead using forceful measures."
A sudden and unplanned inspection mission… Yet another disquieting affair.
Just hearing about it filled Homura and the others with unease and tension.
The implications of those distressing headlines in the newspapers recently had at last hit close to home.
'Excessively long sojourns on Nutella by young male investigators.'
'Construction of a base camp that ignores international treaties.'
Investigator Meivelle had managed to obtain proof that the People's Republic of China was secretly conducting illegal acts. And she had uncovered it by her own hands despite being on Earth.
Furthermore, in order to *directly* confirm the truth with her own blue eyes, she was accompanying Tenryuu to Nutella.
"There's no way we could refuse a personal nomination from the Regina[3] of Nutella. As a result, Vice-President Oozore had to take over our club's next mission in place of the club president. And so, the job of sending someone to participate in the joint mission with Seiran and Hiyoshizaka came to me. Ah, geez, I really drew the short straw…"
Nanakubo made no attempt to hide her reluctance at coming here, causing Homura and the others to smile wryly.
Meivelle-san, huh? If I remember right, she's half-Indian, half-British. A young, natural-born genius. And fluent in Japanese too. And she's super-beautiful to boot… though she's younger than me. God really does nonchalantly gift some people with everything…
Meivelle was an investigator attached to the United Nations headquarters of the UNPIEP. She was still only a fourteen-year-old girl of Indian birth, but the dignified behavior she'd shown during the club president meeting had left a strong impression on both Homura and Touya.

“Still, I can’t believe Miss Chandra personally nominated him. Despite how he looks, Representative Tenryuu must be really well trusted,” remarked Touya.
Nanakubo nodded with a complicated expression.
“India and China have long been bitter enemies over various border disputes—though that goes without saying—so even with Meivelle’s neutral position as a UN investigator, it’s highly possible that they might interfere and spy on her inspection. Miss Meivelle wants to avoid that kind of bothersome trouble, so she formed a contingent of understanding and trusted Exploration Club members to bring with her.”
…Gulp.
Leaving Earth to go to what was, in a sense, enemy territory—to a lawless land where any accident could easily happen, and with only a select few comrades accompanying you. Just imagining it made Homura tremble.
That aside, a question similar to Touya’s occurred to Homura.
“Heh, how scary… but for some reason I got the impression that Miss Chandra disliked Representative Tenryuu.”
Homura spoke her thoughts out loud as she recalled the short conversation with Meivelle during the meeting.
“She dislikes him, all right. I’ve actually seen her jab him with her heel while insulting him with ridiculously harsh slang words before—but her personal feelings don’t matter. That’s the trade-off. I don’t know the details, but President Tenryuu apparently gets along well with the Chinese representative. You need someone to help relax the other side to strike a good balance, you know?”
After saying that, Nanakubo seemed to suddenly recall something and peered at Misasagi’s face.
Misasagi showed no sign of being upset and was naturally listening to Nanakubo’s explanation.
Seeing that, Nanakubo shrugged her shoulders and let out a sigh.
“Well… Our club can’t act so high-and-mighty when our club’s advisor is always buttering up to the Chinese, though.”
With that, the topic of Nanakubo’s last-minute entry to the mission was brought to a close.
Next, Kamikoma and Momoyama-senpai tried exchanging information with Nanakubo on the ruins reported to have been discovered in the Chinese area of Nutella. However, Nanakubo didn’t seem to know many details on that piece of news either and replied to their questions in a slightly tedious tone.
She had overheard that the vestiges of a structure believed to be a giant bridge or rampart had been found in the inner regions of the continent, but that was the most she knew.
Meanwhile, Homura’s attention was drawn to a particular person whose Nutellan appearance she was seeing for the first time.
Saho Akiho.

He was a Trans whose transition form was registered as a “Cat-person”. Just as the name implied, his transition form’s distinguishing features were his cat-like ears and tail. To be exact, the fur on his ears and tail resembled that of a calico cat’s. The color of his eyes had turned lighter as well.
If Homura hadn’t already seen Inari-senpai’s transition form, she might have been unnerved by Saho. Also, Saho had occasionally spoken of his transition form in his frequent texts to her, so she’d been prepared for it beforehand.
The other person she was seeing for the first time on Nutella was Momoyama Masami-senpai, but his appearance remained that of a human’s. Like Taga-senpai, Momoyama-senpai was a quiet person of few words and a third-year student with a lot of experience on Nutella, but he had a weak presence… or so Homura rudely thought.
And the last person who Homura was secretly interested in was—
Kanae… Yuri-san…
Kanae wore the same Hiyoshizaka High female Exploration Club uniform as Kamikoma-senpai.
Back at the uninhabited island on Nutella, Homura had only gotten the chance to briefly glimpse her appearance, and it was only now that she could fully observe the girl.
Dark brown skin. Dark grey hair with a bluish luster. Deep crimson eyes that seemed to suck in those who looked at them. Sharp-pointed ears. Himekawa from Tomakomai Denpa had also possessed a unique air as a Wendigo Trans, but Kanae had a different kind of aloofness.
Her Exploration Club uniform, which was based on the Hiyoshizaka school uniform, seemed to have been modified a bit compared to Kamikoma-senpai’s. It gave off a similar air as the outfit Misasagi-senpai wore as a Magic Warrior.
And right now, Kanae was walking side by side with Misasagi-senpai.
This was a pairing that Homura couldn’t simply overlook. She reflexively walked behind the two of them and listened carefully to their conversation.
Homura couldn’t help but recall that summer evening, when Kanae had declared that Misasagi was the woman who would eventually become her sister-in-law.
…However, they currently seemed to be having a perfectly normal conversation.
“Yuri-chan… Is your physical condition all right?”
Kanae impassively nodded at Misasagi’s kind question.
“For the time being, anyway. I made sure to skip lessons yesterday so that I could sleep and rest.”
“Oh my. Was it effective?”
“Ryou scolded me, saying that I just wanted the chance to sleep.”
Misasagi burst into giggles.

Misasagi was an Elf Trans herself, but the different air she gave off wasn't just due to her exotic appearance. She gave off an air of friendliness and intimacy that she'd never shown in front of Homura and the others.
Saho caught up to walk beside Homura without making a sound.
"Are you interested in Yuri-chan?"
"…Uwah… Akiho-kun. Stop surprising me like that…" said Homura, before nodding at his question.
"Yuri-chan will change even more when it's nighttime. She even grows horns."
"Horns!?" Homura unconsciously shouted.
Kanae turned back to look at them, and Homura blushed in embarrassment.
Once Kanae's eyes were off her again, Homura resumed talking with Saho.
"Akiho-kun, sorry about this. We made you all come out here to help with our moving arrangements, and even made you carry such huge luggage."
"Don't worry about it," said Saho nonchalantly with a shake of his head.
"The only one of us who thinks that way is Yuri-chan. I don't mind at all; I actually have some interest in the full construction of a genuine camp. I would probably never have had the chance to make my own house if it weren't for this opportunity, you know? Besides, it's my first time working in such a big group too. Ah, right, right, I also want to visit the castle of the Nutellan."
"I see. You're looking forward to meeting Subaru-hime like the others, right?"
"…Hah? Why?"
"But… you said you wanted to go to the castle…"
Homura was bewilderment by Saho's sudden change in tone. And Saho went on to spur that confusion further.
"But Subaru-hime is, like a thousand-year-old old lady, right?"
"Wha… O-Old lady…? What~~~?"
"I have no interest in that kind of thing. Let alone over forty, the idea of a woman whose age reaches four digits makes me shudder."
"How could you say that!? That's rude, Akiho-kun!"
Saho faltered in the face of Homura's angry look.
"No, no, why are you getting angry over this—? The whole idea of a young-looking old lady is weird. Old women are supposed to be wrinkled-looking grannies. Those are much better in comparison. Aren't those kinds of grannies cute?"
"Ugh, in any case, apologize! Subaru-hime isn't an old granny. Take those words back!"
"Are you saying something like 'A woman wants to keep putting on airs no matter her age'? Well, I wonder about that. It makes me want to question the aesthetic senses of Nutellans. You know what they say, 'Old people should act their age'…Oww, ooooow! Hey, don't pull on my tail, it'll tear off! Please grab it more gently."

“It’s fine, isn’t it? This will disappear once you return to Earth, right? Or not? Will it leave a scar on your body if I tear it off? Want to give it a try?”
“I don’t want to try something like—Oooow!”
It was deep in the autumn on Nutella.
The farther and higher they traveled on the mountain path, the more the colors of the mountain turned vibrant.
Each time they stopped to rest, Homura put down her bag and took out her analog camera.
She took photos of the breathtaking fall colors of the Nutellan mountains using the special turret filter she’d gotten as a sample from Ecchuu Takaoka High.
Tree groves spread out below in a panorama resembling a burning sea. The living and breathing primordial forest stretching out as far as the eye could see, thin clouds lingering here and there—the sight was beautiful enough to bring tears to one’s eyes. It truly was a vista that no one living in modern Japan could ever see.
Partway through their journey, the group made camp for the night.
The weather hadn’t turned for the worse so far, marking a truly favorable start to their mission.
Some of the others like Saho, Hayase, Touya and Ameno still seemed to have plenty of energy and noisily conversed by the fire till late at night, but Homura went to bed right away from the exhaustion of carrying so much baggage.
She could hear Nanakubo’s faint breathing from where she slept in her sleeping bag in the tent they shared—as well as the gentle sound of Kamikoma’s lute playing from outside.
Ah, if only I could stay awake a bit longer… Though she wanted to listen to Kamikoma’s lute performance, Homura’s drowsiness won over. It was a very pleasant, comfortable night.
Chapter 15 END

ANIMAL
EXPLORATION CLUB
it'd be nice if Touya-kun had a tail too~

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

(1) The kanji below the English word “payload” reads “available number of carry-on items during transport”.

(2) Nozomi train: the fastest train service running on the Tōkaidō/Sanyō Shinkansen in Japan. The service stops at only the largest stations, and along the stretch between Shin-Osaka and Hakata.

(3) Regina: Latin word for “queen”.

Chapter 16

The next day, the air was slightly moist and chilly.
Having finally reached the road that led to Subaru-hime's castle, the group was nearly at the cliff-side castle located beside a waterfall.
The stone-paved road was still well-maintained despite the many years it had weathered. There were piles of vivid-colored leaves lying along the roadside, but the road still gave off the impression that it had been swept only a few days ago.
On closer inspection, the stones bore traces of wheel tracks, vestiges of the horse-drawn carriages that had once passed through here. But there was no longer any sign of carriages in this land now.
It's already been a year... since our last visit to the Witch's Valley.
Upon reflection, this road was filled with scary memories for Homura, as she could still vividly recall how it felt when she had desperately run from the terrifying witch-like Subaru-hime and faced off against the pack of wolves.
—Suddenly, a group of animals appeared from behind a low ridge ahead.
"Ah." Saho was the first one to notice them and speak up.
Nanakubo followed his gaze and stiffened.
"What're those? Dogs? Wolves? They're huge!"
"Those are the native wolves Subaru-hime breeds and rears at the castle, right?" said Hayase, as he slowly pulled back his hand which had reflexively moved to his bow.
Homura turned around in front of the others and wagged her finger fussily.
"No, no. They aren't reared animals, but rather Subaru-hime's precious family," she said pointedly. "Besides, their leader Yukiwarimaru is much bigger. Don't let yourselves get shocked by just this."
"Why are you acting so smug and superior?" retorted Nanakubo. "Haah. So they're basically familiars. I was really nervous for a second there."
Homura nodded and then called out to the wolves.
"Hey, is one of you Kirimaru? Or Kosuke!? We came back to visit!"
"……"
The rest of the group gulped in silence.
The wolves reacted to Homura's voice.
Two of the wolves immediately ran forward while wagging their tails happily.
Several more wolves appeared from the trees that had stood along the roadside for centuries.
Homura was happy and excited that they reacted as she'd expected.
"See, they remember me!"

—But as Homura held out her hands in greeting with a beaming smile, the wolves ignored her and instead jumped at Misasagi-senpai.
“Kyah!”
They stood up on their hind legs and draped themselves over Misasagi.
They were so attached to Misasagi that it was hard to believe that it had been a year since they last met her.
“—It’s good to see you again.”
Though surprised at first, Misasagi happily patted the heads of the wolves.
“…Huh…?” Homura tilted her head in confusion.
“I don’t think these two are Kirimaru and Kosuke,” remarked Saho from the side.
“You can tell, Akiho-kun?”
“Of course. There there, there there!”
Saho put down his bags and hugged one of the wolves that approached him out of curiosity. The wolf showed no signs of displeasure and actually seemed to enjoy being hugged by Saho despite meeting him for the first time.
“There, there. This one is Juuzou. That one is Kamanosuke. And that one there is Kosuke… That one’s Seikai! And you’re Rokurou!”
The path was now filled with giant wolves.
“Amazing, Saho,” said Touya, impressed. “This is your first time meeting them, right? You remembered each and every one of their names just from the photos and reports we brought back?”
Meanwhile, Homura was glaring at Saho with narrowed eyes.
“I see, Akiho-kun. Your real objective wasn’t Subaru-hime, but these guys…”
Homura grabbed the nearby Kosuke (probably) and squatted down to protest to the wolf from the same eye level.
“Hey~, you guys still hold a grudge against me, don’t you!? Because I sprayed you with tons of tear gas, right!? Right?”
“……”
Kosuke (probably) lowered his nose with a troubled expression and shrank away from Homura.
“How cold…”
As Homura was filled with lonely disappointment, she heard a shout from behind her.
“H-Homura-san, s-save me!”
“What’s wrong, Ame-chan? Wait, what’s that cub—? Hyaaaah~”
Hearing Ameno’s weak cry for help, Homura turned around and then came to a complete stand still with her hands over her chest.
A pure-white wolf stood at Ameno’s feet. It was still just a little cub.
Its small fangs were biting Ameno’s shoe as it growled and refused to let go.
“Hyaaaah, what’s this fluffy creature~? I-It’s so cute it pains my heart.”
“Are you trying to eat me!? I’m sorry, please don’t eat meeeee! I have low nutritional value!”

Since Homura wasn't making any move due to cuteness overload, help eventually came from beside her.
"Wow, this little guy's so cute! Here we go."
Kamikoma-senpai let out a cry of joy upon seeing the cub.
She picked up the cub with experienced hands, finally freeing Ameno from the small fangs.
Though the cub was docile towards Kamikoma as she held it, it still continued to glare and growl at Ameno.
Homura had no idea what was making it so on guard, but she unconsciously sympathized with Ameno.
While happily looking over the cub, Kamikoma made a pose with it in her arms!
"A Wolf-chan Taking Along Its Child[1]!"
"No, no, it's the opposite in this situation," interjected Touya as a stalwart fan of period dramas.
"Normally, it'd be unwise to do this kind of casual skinship with Nutellan animals, but… it's okay in this situation, right? It's only half-wild—oh, it's a boy—and we'll be staying at the castle anyway."
While making such excuses to herself, Kamikoma rubbed her cheek against the wolf.
"L-Let me hug him too."
Homura ominously approached.
Touya and Misasagi also walked over to Kamikoma and the cub in her arms with great interest.
"This is a new face. Since his fur is pure white, could he be…?"
"Erika-san's—Suzuran's little brother."
Touya and Misasagi exchanged looks.
Upon closer inspection, there was a familiar grey spot on the cub's brow.
Eventually, Misasagi-senpai took the lead and the Exploration Club members departed for the castle accompanied by the wolves on either side.
The white cub kept chasing after Ameno while weaving between their feet.
The others laughed at Ameno's cries as she ran away from it, but Nanakubo murmured quietly as she watched the restless cub.
"…Yeah… Genshiko[2] isn't around anymore…"
After leaving the forest, they arrived at a wide open valley.
There was a rest spot located near the castle.
There, a golden-haired witch wearing silk clothes greeted the Exploration Club members from where she sat at an outdoor table with her face turned to the side.
"Subaru-san!"
Upon seeing her off in the distance, Homura called out to her and waved her hand.
Homura had finally grown accustomed to that fantasy appearance of a blond-haired, blue-eyed woman in a Japanese kimono.
…However, there was something off about her right now.

The witch princess merely watched them from her chair without moving until they reached where she was.
Homura faltered, worried that she might be unwell.
Subaru-hime faintly opened her eyes and gazed at them with harsh suspicion.
She looked over them all and then spoke placidly.
“Ye seem to have quite a lot of baggage. Who are ye? Traveling artisans? On what business have ye come to visit this castle?”
“…Eh? S-Subaru-san…?”
H-Has she forgotten us…!?
Homura wasn’t the only one struck by bewilderment.
Nanakubo and the others who were visiting this place for the first time looked at Misasagi pleadingly.
Misasagi tilted her head slightly in puzzlement and carefully gazed over Subaru.
“——”
At that point, most likely by unconscious reflex, Touya’s hand went to the sword on his hip.
Noticing that, Homura restrained his arm.
“Touya-kun.”
“Y…Yeah, I know.”
—After a few short seconds where Homura kept her hand on Touya’s arm, Subaru-hime’s expression relaxed into a smile.
“—A mere jest. Welcome back.”
Everyone breathed out in relief at once upon hearing that.
Homura reflexively slapped Touya lightly on the back. Touya smiled wryly.
“Wasn’t that a bit too mean-spirited?” chided Misasagi.
“Ye have not shown yeselves hither for a long time since then, so I wast sulking a little.”
Without showing much shame for her joke, Subaru rose from her chair.
Her wooden clog clattered against the ground and her long hair fluttered in the wind.
Subaru looked them over once more.
“I see lots of new faces among ye. I am Princess Iotsumisumaru, the lord of this castle. Mine name is quite long, so ye may call me Subaru.”
After exchanging glances with Misasagi, Kamikoma stepped forward and greeted Subaru-hime.
The sight of Kamikoma’s dignified demeanor made the other club members naturally straighten their backs as well.
“We apologize for not contacting you in so long, Subaru-hime. I am Kamikoma Sachi, a 2nd rank investigator sent from Earth by the Japanese division of the UNPIEP. I have been entrusted with leading this investigative team. We consist of eleven members from Seiran High, Hiyoshizaka High and Nagumo High. Starting today, we’ll be staying here in

your castle for the next seven days. Though we might cause trouble for you, please look after us.”
“““—Please look after us!”””
Following Kamikoma’s lead, everyone bowed their heads and greeted Subaru-hime at once, their voices echoing through the valley.
Homura bowed her head along with the others.
Subaru nodded at them in satisfaction.
“Umu. There is no need to brace yeselves so much. Please enjoy ye stay hither as if t’wast a noble inn.”
While they exchanged words, the wolves were quietly sitting slightly off to the side.
Only the cub came restlessly sprinting over to them, catching Subaru’s attention.
“Hey now, do not be so rude, Hatsuyuki.”
The cub barked shrilly in response and ran over to Subaru.
Subaru picked him up into her arms and spoke gently to Homura and the others.
“Then, shall we be off? First, ye should put down thy luggage and relax yeselves in the castle. Please leave any tools ye need in the construction of thy base camp in the castle’s stables where tis easy to come and go.”
Picking back up the luggage they had put down while exchanging greetings, the Exploration Club members followed after Subaru.
The castle watchtower, which was erected as if hugging the jutting cliff, immediately came into view once they climbed over a gently-slopping hill.
However, Homura’s attention was fixed on the cub hugged to Subaru’s chest.
“Umm, umm, Subaru-san. Sorry for asking right after our reunion, but is that cub Yukiwarimaru’s…?”
“Hmm? —Ah, I see. This is thy first time meeting this little one, Homura.”
Subaru looked down at the cub in her arms.
“Indeed, this one is Yukiwarimaru’s child. The father is likely Koroku. I plan to eventually name this child Yukiwarimaru as well once he hath matured. Until then, his childhood name shall be Hatsuyuki.”
“Hatsuyuki-chan—Haa~, his name’s cute too.”
Homura smiled in innocent joy.
“So, where’s his mother Yukiwarimaru? I haven’t seen any sign of her so far.”
“This little one is not her only child. She is caring for her other children within the castle at the moment. However, this child immediately dashed out to join the rest of the pack despite still being too young to hunt,” explained Subaru with a troubled expression. “Hmm. Mine hands are occupied with this little one. Could one of ye carry that basket?”
“This? Wow, this is pretty heavy. Hey, Akiho, help me with this thing,” said Hayase as he picked up the basket next to the table.
“What’s that?” asked Homura.

“Harvest from the mountain. I went mushroom-gathering within the mountain this morning. I figured that ye would be arriving soon and would be feeling quite hungry upon thy arrival.”
The basket was filled with heaps of mushrooms whose color varied between tawny brown, white and bright yellow.
“Thank you for all the consideration you’ve shown us.”
Next to Homura, Misasagi-senpai bowed her head in gratitude to Subaru, who smiled broadly.
“I may have picked a bit too much.”
“It’s fine, we can just boil them all together in a cauldron… just like a witch, haha,” said Homura.
“A cauldron? It would be better to fry the mushrooms than boil them. They are quite tasty when cooked with rice. Do thee like rice, Homura?”
“I love mushrooms with rice!” affirmed Homura with a vigorous nod.
However…
“What tis the matter, Hatsuyuki?”
A shadow suddenly passed over Subaru’s gentle expression.
“Wait… this presence is…”
Subaru turned back to look at the others, who had just started to follow after her.
Subaru directed a sharp, searching gaze at Ameno.
“—What are thee? Thee are not human. Are thee a ‘puppet’!?”
Though starlted by Subaru’s intense questioning, Ameno replied.
“You’re talking… about me, right? I’m a robot. My name is Fujimori Ameno. Nice to meet you, Subaru-san. Just as you say, I’m not human.”
Ameno politely bowed in greeting.
“……A ‘robot’?”
Subaru turned her questioning gaze to Misasagi next.
To make matters worse, Hatsuyuki jumped down from Subaru’s arms and stood in front of her with a growl, as if to face off against Ameno.
After reassuring the confused Ameno through eye contact, Misasagi explained the nature of a robot in simple terms.
“—So she is a **mechanical doll**, in other words. And one given life, at that? Is Earth filled with such things?”
Subaru was clearly shocked by the information.
Misasagi was about to correct Subaru’s hasty conclusions, but Kanae spoke up first from the side.
“—Including Ameno, there are still only three robots that are recognized to have self-awareness. All of them possess spirit stones from Nutella within their cores.”
“Hey, Kanae, don’t just spout off classified information like that—” frantically shouted Nanakubo.
But even after hearing that, Subaru’s wariness didn’t fade.

“I cannot allow any mechanical doll that moves without human commands into my castle. There is a **detached dwelling** for puppets beside the orchard. This one may stay there.”
“Eh… wait, Subaru-hime?” said Nanakubo worriedly.
“Very well. I’ll follow your directions, of course,” said Ameno with an obedient nod.
“No way, Ame-chan…!”
“Don’t worry, I have no problem with it, Homura-san,” Ameno crisply replied.
Misasagi, who had been silently listening until then, chose that moment to speak up.
“By detached dwelling… you mean the farming tool shed we saw on the way here, correct? In that case, I will stay there as well. I can take care of my meals and bedding myself, so it won’t be a bother for me.”
“Eh, president? Why?” asked Ameno in surprise.
Homura and Subaru-hime were startled as well, guessing Misasagi’s intentions.
“…Mayo. What tis the meaning of this?”
Subaru knit her brow in clear confusion at Misasagi’s firm attitude.
“Then I’ll do the same,” said Touya as he went to stand next to Ameno as well.
“—You too, Takumi-san?”
Finally realizing that the situation was getting complicated and that she herself was the reason for it, Ameno’s expression gradually turned pained.
And, following the flow of events, the eyes of the other Exploration Club members turned to Homura, the last member of the Seiran High club.
“Eh?”
…Seriously?
Though fearful of the unsettling mood, Homura roused herself to action by telling herself that this level of trouble would be resolved quickly.
“E-Err… Then I’ll stay at the detached dwelling too… Kuh… My mushroom meal…”
Homura walked over to Misasagi and the others while clearly conveying her lingering regrets over her choice.
Unexpectedly, Nanakubo was the one who panicked at this turn of events.
“Hey, hey, hey, Seiran club president. This is bad. You gotta back down here.”
That whispered warning didn’t seem to reach Misasagi’s ears, however.
Subaru spoke in a firm tone.
“Listen, Mayo—If thee are a Misasagi, thee should understand. A young lady of your status should not lodge with a puppet.”
Even so, Misasagi didn’t back down.
“This has nothing to do with the Misasagi family. Ameno-san is a precious fellow club member to me. Our relationship is much closer than that

between lord and retainer you're thinking of, Subaru-hime-sama. If you won't allow Ameno-san into the castle, then naturally I will follow her."
"I cannot allow that. Please do not trouble me like this."
Subaru's bewilderment increased in the face of her family descendant's obstinacy.
"Hmm… So we're faced with culture clash right from the get go, huh…?" groaned Kamikoma with folded arms.
Nanakubo walked over and whispered into her ear.
"Hey, Koma-san. This is really bad. Without Misasagi Mayo, our negotiations are going to suffer badly."
"…Even if you say that, when Mayo gets like that, she never backs down…"
Nanakubo was flustered by Kamikoma's swift resignation.
Subaru turned to face the other club members.
"Are there none among ye who can convince Mayo? Or are ye all of the same mind?"
Everyone seemed to have their own thoughts on the matter, but they all awaited the decision of this expedition's leader, Kamikoma.
Kamikoma tried to change Misasagi's mind in a laidback manner.
"Mayo, it's like they say, 'When in Rome'. Besides, Ameno isn't the kind of girl to hold a grudge, right?"
"…Would you be able to say that if Taga-kun was treated the same way?"
Perhaps having expected that immediate rebuttal, Kamikoma merely scratched her head in exasperation.
Finally turning a bit serious, Kamikoma was about to speak up again, when —
"Umm…"
Homura timidly raised her hand.
"Err… Subaru-hime, you let Yukiwarimaru into the castle, right?"
"Of course."
"Then how about you just treat Ameno-chan as Misasagi-senpai's pet…?"
"'Pet'?"
Subaru and even the other Exploration Club members wore puzzled expressions at Homura's suggestion.
"Yes. Umm, on Earth we refer to pets as 'part of the family'. I've never raised a pet myself, but, ah, wasn't there some lord who really loved dogs?"
Homura turned expectantly to Touya, who reluctantly gave her a hand.
"The Dog Shogun—Tokugawa Tsunayoshi. It's true that he raised dogs within his castle."
"Right, right, that shogun. As expected of Touya-kun! In other words… If Ameno-chan's a pet, doesn't she get the okay to enter the castle?"
Homura peeked at the castle's master with a tilt of her head.
Astonishment still clear on her face, Subaru spoke.
"I swore that I would lend ye mine aid. Tis an oath I swore to my departed father. I would never forget it… Does that 'robot' eat and drink? —No? Then she really is just like a puppet."

After some thought, Subaru stared at Misasagi's unwavering eyes finally sighed.
"Very well. If ye all are so insistent, ye may let the 'robot' stay in the stables with your luggage. Unlike the detached dwelling, there is not any chilling wind there. Tis easy to climb the stairs up to the castle watchtower from there as well. That should be satisfactory enough."
Pausing for a moment, Subaru then spoke emphatically.
"However, keep this in mind—make sure the 'robot' stays away from Yukiwarimaru."
"From Yukiwarimaru…?" asked Misasagi.
"Yes. Yukiwarimaru is wise, but she is now a mother as well. She might forget her proper judgement before her cubs. If that happens, t'wont end with mere play-biting. I will make sure to stop Yukiwarimaru from approaching the stables and that 'robot' as well."
Subaru turned her heels to resume heading to the castle, but she sent a last side glance at Misasagi.
"Understood, Mayo? This matter is settled."
"Yes. Thank you very much."
Misasagi bowed deeply at Subaru's back.
"…Accompany me with Kamikoma-dono. I will guide ye through the castle ahead of the others. The two of ye may discuss how to assign bedrooms to the others."
"Yes. Let's go, Koma-chan."
"Roger that. Ah, I felt my lifespan shorten just now."
Upon hearing Kamikoma's grumbling, Misasagi's attitude completely changed as her head drooped.
"Sorry, Koma-chan."
"I keep telling you not to call me Koma-chan."
—As the two club presidents went off with the witch on that note, the remaining club members all breathed sighs of relief.
Homura nestled up to Ameno to cheer the robot girl up.
"I don't know what the stables are like, but at least we'll be staying in the castle together. Isn't that great, Ame-chan?"
"Yes. Sorry for causing all this trouble…"
Touya, who had begun to lead everyone to the stables, turned to look back at Ameno.
"There's no need for you to apologize, Ameno. Having you alone excluded like that is just too unreasonable. And what was with that warning about Yukiwarimaru?"
"It's fine, Takumi-san. I don't mind what Subaru-san said. It's true that robots and humans are fundamentally different, so it's only natural."
"But… don't you always get mad at Mori-chan about comments like that? Like when she said we should put you in the car trunk as a joke."
"Ah, now that you mention it," said Ameno with raised eyebrows.
However, she then drew her hands to her chest and continued speaking.

“But now, I’ve been acknowledge as a full-fledged member of the Exploration Club, so I don’t wish for anything more. This is completely different from jokes made on Earth. If it’s for the exploration efforts of the club, I will do anything I can,” said Ameno proudly. However, her gaze was drawn to the little cub chasing after the hem of Subaru’s kimono with his little paws. “…Still, being hated by Hatsuyuki-san… does make me feel a bit lonely…”
“Uuu, you really are a brave and splendid kid.”
Homura soothingly patted Ameno’s head, while Touya watched in exasperation.
“You’re no replacement for Hatsuyuki, Hinooka. And you just called her a pet, remember? That’s plenty rude as well. Apologize to Ameno.”
“Yes, I’m sorry. You can hug me in place of Hatsuyuki, you know? Go right ahead.”
“Then I’ll oblige. Ahahaha. Still, I wonder what kind of animal Homura-san would be best compared to?”
“…Since she sleeps all the time for no particular reason, how about a sloth?”
“Hey, Touya-kun!?”
Even while chatting with Ameno and Touya and noisily complaining, Homura sensed a silent gaze directed at them from behind her back.
When she turned around to look, she spotted the source of the gaze.
…Again… right, Kanae-san?
A sharp, challenging light hidden within the depths of sleepy half-lidded eyes.
It was definitely coming from Kanae Yuri.
Shortly after, a small group gathered at a table along the terrace of the castle watchtower.
The lord of the castle, Subaru-hime, sat at the head of the table, accompanied by Kamikoma, Misasagi and Nanakubo.
The sunlight here was nice and warm, but the wind blowing from the elevated marshy grasslands beyond the cliff was already as cold as winter.
“……So cold.”
Now then, at the moment, Nanakubo was feeling bored out of her mind.
The blond-haired half-Japanese woman in the kimono was leaning forward and proudly recommending pickled vegetables and tea cakes to the rest of them, so, despite thinking to herself that the woman was acting just like an old granny, Nanakubo patiently listened along with the other two girls.
Occasionally, they could hear angry shouts from Saho Akiho and Homura down below.
When words like “Granny, granny, ero-granny” echoed loudly through the valley, Kamikoma glared sharply at the pickled vegetables and stabbed them with toothpicks, her gaze promising severe scolding later. The guys down below shouldn’t have the time to be playing around anyway.

However, Nanakubo simply shrugged off by the carefree attitude of the younger club members, figuring that they were still high schoolers at the end of the day and were acting like they were on a school trip, a mindset which actually relieved her compared to the alternative.
—She returned her attention to the conversation at hand.
“Before we look at the construction plan for the base camp, there are some things I would like to give you.”
Kamikoma opened the discussion in a formal tone.
“First, this is a handwritten letter from Misasagi Yoshihiro as a representative of modern Japan. As you know, he is a descendent of your uncle and Mayo’s father. Councillor Yoshihiro has served in important offices consecutively within the Japanese government for many years now. His knowledge of Nutella is especially deep among current politicians, and he is greatly trusted by the prime minister who governs our country as well. Please accept it.”
“—I shall.”
Kamikoma respectfully handed over a folded letter, written on traditional Japanese paper using an ink brush, and Subaru graciously accepted it.
On the back of the weighty letter was a wax seal. Subaru nodded with an impressed expression.
—When Subaru asked, “What is the exact nature of Yoshihiro-dono’s work within the government?”, Misasagi vaguely replied, “His post is similar to that of the Shogun’s Council of Elders or their assistant officials in the Tokugawa shogunate.” Describing the full details would likely take some time, so she left it at that for now.
Next, Misasagi took out another letter.
“This is a letter of greeting from the advisor of our Exploration Club—Fujimori Chiayu, an exploration director. This contains an official correspondence from UNPIEP… think of it as a diplomatic document. It touches upon the details of our plans to construct a base camp here as well. Fujimori sends her sincere regards.”
“Hmm, I have indeed received it. If there are any words I do not understand, I shall ask for thy aid.”
Fujimori’s handwritten letter was no less thick than that of Councillor Misasagi.
Misasagi then took out yet another letter.
“And this is—”
“There is more?”
“Yes,” said Misasagi with a grin. “This letter is from Suzuran. Please take it.”
“……”
Misasagi held out a run-of-the-mill letter patterned with a girlish design, completely different from the other stiff and formal letters.
It was addressed “To Subaru-sama” in calligraphy pen on the front.
“Her writing is unpolished as usual.”

Subaru smiled wryly as she stared at the letter's handwriting.
"Suzuran-chan's writing is quite fast and skillful compared to other kids her age, you know," said Misasagi.
Subaru's expression brightened upon hearing that.
"I-Is that so? —Ahem. She calls herself Ono Erika now, correct? Knowing that wild girl, she is probably causing trouble for her mother and others around her. Still…"
Subaru wore a gentle yet somewhat sad smile.
"…Is she in good health?"
"Yes. She's the picture of health and vigor. Suzuran-chan also told me some things she wanted me to pass on to you. I'll tell you when we have time later. And give you some photos as well."
"I am just glad to hear that she is healthy. I shall look over these letters later. Thy time here is limited, correct? We must not keep thy attendants waiting. Let us work out the details of the 'base camp'."
Though she said that, Subaru was clearly itching to read the pile of letters, which made Nanakubo and the others feel somewhat apologetic for the trouble.
The first items of their meeting were—
-Which of the proposed sites near the castle would be suitable for the base camp?
-How many building materials would they be able to procure on site?
-How should they divvy up food duties during their stay here?
They carefully discussed these issues one by one.
Subaru listened attentively and showed surprisingly quick understanding on the issues in question, and even when words and concepts that didn't exist in the Edo period were brought up, she managed to immediately get the gist of them once they were explained to her.
Nanakubo couldn't yet discern whether her flexible comprehension ability was a special trait of Nutellans or a personal skill of Subaru herself.
While Nanakubo was distracted by such thoughts during the meeting—
"Incidentally, does Nanakubo-dono come from Kamigata[3]?"
"—Huh? Kamigata? Ah, yeah. Kansai is the Ebisu of Naniwa[4]."
"So I was right. Fufu. I have quite the discerning eye, do I not?" said Subaru proudly.
"Haah. Subaru-hime, did you come here on an oxcart from the palace on the Moon?" retorted Nanakubo sarcastically.
"Indeed. I basked in so much moonlight that my black hair turned completely gold."
"Haah."
Nanakubo was taken aback by the princess' occasionally odd behavior since she could never tell whether the woman was joking or just being a natural airhead, but the Osakan girl didn't let it shake her and kept her inner thoughts cool and calm.

The results that Nanakubo was personally trying to bring back from this mission weren't something small.
In fact, the construction of the base camp was merely a supplement to her true mission.
While remaining conscious of the important duty that Representative Tenryuu and Vice-President Oozore had entrusted to her, she vigilantly waited for the right opportunity.
The next morning.
After spending the night at the castle, the eleven Exploration Club members had a brief breakfast and then gathered in a plaza near the castle as a thin fog hung in the air.
This was a meeting to explain their work plans for the next week.
Kamikoma and Misasagi had stayed up late last night to come up with this plan.
Both of them had previous experience constructing base camps and they had Subaru's support this time, so that made things much easier. Based on the yawns Momoyama was letting out, it seemed he had helped with making the plan as well.
—The site to construct the base camp was pretty much decided now.
They had selected a deserted building on the other side of an irrigation stream from the inner citadel of the castle.
It was a two-story stone building with a stable foundation, but part of the building was quite damaged, which made it difficult to use as it currently was.
"Twas a workshop in the past. Twas already abandoned when I was a child. There are ferns growing in rooms with collapsed roofs and it has been left abandoned to nature, but I hear that ye have confidence in your repair skills. Feel free to modify and use it as ye see fit."
After giving minimal advice, Subaru stood back and watched them without giving any further instructions.
…Subaru's appearance was quite different from usual today. The sleeves of her kimono were tucked up with cords and her long hair was tied up with a working bandana around her forehead. Despite her words, she was clearly eager to help.
Misasagi explained today's work while looking over the rough design of the base camp that Momoyama-senpai had drawn.
Their first job was to clean the entire building.
Though it was called cleaning, it was a huge endeavor that involved breaking down stone walls and digging up the ground. It seemed the first-year female members wouldn't be participating until they reached the stage of working on the building's interior.
"……"
While Misasagi explained this, Homura was in a bad mood that had been plaguing her all morning.

That was only natural, since she hadn't gotten to bath for two nights in a row, and she hadn't even had the time to wash her hair this morning, having to settle with merely washing her face with cold water.
"I'm surprised you're in such good shape this morning, Kanae-san…"
"Why? Because we slept in sleeping bags last night?"
Next to Homura, Kanae coolly replied to Homura.
"Well, that too…"
If they had been staying outdoors, Homura would have been able to resign herself to it as unavoidable circumstances… But it was apparently hard to endure when staying in the castle which was technically a place of civilization.
"Well, I have some good news for you, Homura!"
"Huh?"
Picking up on the explanation from Misasagi, Kamikoma pointed at Homura.
"We've gotten Subaru-hime to open up the castle's bathroom for us. Apparently, it's an open-air bath that can fit up to ten people."
"A bathroom!? And an open-air bath!? Really!?"
Homura wasn't the only one who cheered at this piece of news.
"However, she apparently hasn't run any hot water through it since Suzuran returned to Earth, so could you go to clean it after this with Yuri?" asked Kamikoma.
"U-Understood. If that's how it is, I'd be happy to," agreed Homura.
To Homura and her sister Tsuyu, bath cleaning duties were an annoying chore in their family, but it was a very different matter when it came to the chance to take a proper bath on Nutella. However…
"I'm fine with just using a small tub like last night instead of such a needlessly huge open-air bath, though."
Homura's eyes widened in surprise at Kanae's unbelievable declaration.
"Hey, hey, Yuri. At least help so that us guys have something to look forward to after our hard work today," said Hayase in a reprimanding tone.
"You sound like an old man."
Kanae turned her face away defiantly. Kamikoma spoke up in calm voice.
"This way we won't have to worry about Akiho peeking on us, though."
Homura stiffened at those words.
"Ah… Akiho-kun, you peeked on us last night!? Really!?"
"No, I still haven't done any peeking yet. It was too dark last night," replied Saho nonchalantly.
"…Very well. I will help clean the bath."
After briefly staring at Saho who stared back blankly, Kanae reluctantly agreed to the request.
With that settled, Homura and Kanae left the others and headed back to the castle.
The remaining club members headed to the deserted building.
On the sloping land in the middle of the path head, there were a series of rice-fields that had already been harvested and been drained of water for

the season. Various piles of bundled rice straws could be seen among the fields.
Rice straw was a handy material useful for making roofs and sleeping cots, so Kamikoma looked positively gleeful at the sight of them.
“If this was before the harvest, these fields would be a cluster of crop heads[5].”
“Ah, now that you mention it.”
As Touya reflexively replied, he vividly recalled when he and Homura had previously reached this castle by following the vestiges of paddy fields. He had wondered why Homura had been knowledgeable about plowed field flowers, but now it made sense considering the connection to her name.
“Nutellan paddy fields, huh… This is quite the precious sight, in a certain sense,” remarked Nanakubo to no one in particular.
“Amazing. The selective breeding here is done with terrifying skill and precision,” whispered Momoyama.
“Hmm, so you get it, Momoyama-senpai. The crops look ordinary, but they’re probably strong against disease, right?”
“Yeah, so it seems. Normally you wouldn’t be able to farm rice paddies in this kind of climate.”
“Ah, I see,” said Nanakubo with a nod. She calmly looked at the leftover harvested rice heads that had been left to the sparrows in a corner of the field. “Hey, do you think we might be able to make a granary if we borrowed those rice seeds…?”
“Those rice seeds look unbelievably golden. The gene resources on Nutella all seem to be that way. Speaking of selective breeding, India managed to spectacularly keep away famine by applying similar breeding methods to wheat and rice. A superior version of staple foods has incalculable value for countries with overpopulation problems and even those without such issues…”
Nanakubo shrugged her shoulders at this state school-level self-murmuring.
“Haah. It sounds really difficult and troublesome—by the way, Subaru-hime, did you harvest all these paddy fields yourself?”
“Indeed. I shall teach you how to utilize them at a later time,” said Subaru.
“Ah, those things,” said Touya in realization, and Subaru smiled in response.
“Sounds like there’s some secret to it. How suspicious.”
The worrisome issue of bathing (and laundry cleaning) had also been resolved with the opening of the open-air bath.
With both clothing and shelter taking care of, the only necessity of life left was “food”.
The first order of business was staple foods, like grains, potatoes and vegetables.
Those had already been supplied and stocked up by Subaru in anticipation of this mission, so there was nothing to worry about on that front. However, relying on just those would be insufficient and unsatisfying, so they wanted

to stock up on sources of protein as well. There was no such thing as a high schooler that disliked hamburgers.
They had already cooked the last of their hunted deer meet last night.
Right before they headed to the deserted building, Misasagi made a proposal.
“Let’s think of as many means of food provision as possible. Since the immediate area around the castle supports the wolf packs, all notable large animals have been hunted to the point where there’s none left. Subaru-san said she would provide some of her household chickens, but we should leave that as a last resort and provide for ourselves first. Since we have to take the future into consideration, our choices are limited.”
“And the faster the better. The most reliable food source is fish. I’ll go myself. It’d be just perfect if there are eels as well.”
Misasagi nodded at Nanakubo’s swift suggestion.
“Yes, that would be a big help. Let’s start with that. As for who to accompany you…”
“What, are you worried how the construction work today will require a lot of heavy lifting? But having Taga-kun around should be enough for the most part. So Touya, how about you come with me? You know the rivers around here, right?”
“Yes, to a degree.”
Touya actually wanted to participate in the construction work, but he convinced himself that planning out and securing food provision were also important in order to use this place as a base camp in the future.
“Looks like you’re in agreement. Nanakubo-san, Touya-kun, we leave this matter to you,” said Misasagi.
“Sure. But first, we should get a look at the planned construction site.”
At that point, Ameno raised her hand.
“President, can I accompany Nanakubo-senpai and Takumi-san too!?”
“No way,” said Nanakubo bluntly.
“Eeh~, please let me do it.”
Ameno was overflowing with eagerness, but more than that, she just wanted to look around at various places.
“This is your first mission, Ameno-san, so you’ll be staying by my side as much as possible.”
“…Yeah, I guess you’re right. Taking care of the construction is most important right now.”
As Ameno slumped in disappointed, Misasagi spoke encouragingly.
“If the camp construction proceeds smoothly, we can go hunting together later.”
“I see, understood. I’ll work hard!”
—Meanwhile, with Homura and Kanae.
After separating from the others, the two of them returned to the castle.
They reached the bathroom following Subaru’s directions and immediately began cleaning.

The huge bathroom seemed to be made entirely of stone, with glass panes on part of the ceiling and ornamental tiles on the floor. There was also a thick cypress plank on one side of the bathtub.
The bathroom, located in the castle watchtower, had a fantastic and calming view that any bath-loving Japanese would enjoy. Undoubtedly, the original inhabitants of this castle must have cherished this bathroom.
The fog draping over the land gradually faded and the clear blue sky began to peek out above. Homura sighed in admiration as she gazed over the land around the castle which glittered under the several beams of sunlight that shone down.
“Hah… what a wonderful view. It’s like a spa or hot-spring hotel…”
Homura was suddenly struck by the idle thought that this might reflect the tastes of Subaru’s father Misasagi Yoshizumi, a Japanese man from the Edo period.
Homura had been quite surprised when she’d found that the bathroom had not only a huge bathtub that could fit ten people, but also a cold bath for cooling off and a sauna that drew in hot air from a kettle.
“Then, I’ll do this side, okay?”
Kanae declared which area she would take charge of to Homura while holding a pig-hair brush with a long handle that resembled a modern deck brush.
“Y-Yeah, sure.”
Homura hurriedly nodded back and picked up a wooden washbasin and a tool that resembled a scrubbing brush made of collected plant fibers.
The two of them first folded up the sleeves of their clothes and got started, but more algae and liverworts went flying off the floor than they expected.
Naturally, she hadn’t prepared a swimsuit. With no other choice, she and Kanae tied up their hair and switched to wearing T-shirts they wouldn’t mind getting wet, with only their underwear on underneath.
I don’t know whether to say ‘as expected’ or be surprised at Kanae-san…
—Kanae’s bodylines were fully exposed now.
Homura had been able to vaguely tell when the other girl was in her exploration outfit, but Kanae Yuri really did have amazing proportions that rivaled that of Misasagi-senpai. Though her height was the same as Homura’s, when it came to a comparison of various individual parts…
Mrgh, she’d be able to give Kurama-san a good run for her money?
Homura’s gaze kept getting drawn to Kanae each time she went to draw water into her basin from the castle’s interior aqueduct. She considered it payback for how she hadn’t had the time to carefully look at Kanae during the race.
Her long limbs and slender ankles were further emphasized by her small face, making her beautiful enough to die for in Homura’s eyes. However, unlike Saho and Inari’s tails, which tended to move around energetically all the time, Kanae’s thin, pointed tail displayed no emotional reactions. It was

currently jutting out casually from Kanae's underwear and wrapped around her thigh.
Saho had said that she also grew horns at night, but Homura had yet to actually see it for herself. In the first place, was it really okay for Kanae, having horns just suddenly sprout from her head? And what was the best way to describe her appearance? If Homura had to choose, it would be…
—An imp?
As if she'd read Homura's rude thoughts, Kanae suddenly turned around to look at her.
"…What? Work seriously. This won't be the end, you know. We're probably going to get assigned more work this afternoon."
"Yes! Sorry!"
Homura panicked in the face of Kanae's murder-filled gaze.
Kanae had acted as if she found the whole thing a bother and displayed little enthusiasm during the meeting, but once she started working, she worked efficiently.
She really wasn't a good match for Homura, who reacted in surprise and excitement to every unusual item she saw in the castle and was trying to enjoy this cleaning work in her own way.
However, Homura couldn't bear the discomfort of silence between them.
"—Kanae-san, what kind of Trans are you registered as?"
"…Don't bother asking me things you can easily find out by looking it up on the collab."
"Sorry."
The Exploration Club's volunteer-operated online collaboration software, which Kanae herself had helped program, had self-introduction summaries for every club member. However, this place didn't have Internet connection, obviously.
"……Haah… I'm a TSPC-type Diabolo[6]."
"What's a 'Diabolo'?"
"Like I said, look up that kind of thing yourself."
They kept their hands working even during this curt conversation.
However, their conversation gradually died off and they returned to total silence. Only the sounds of their brushes echoed through the bathroom.
Suddenly, Kanae lifted her head.
"…I just remembered. There's something I've wanted to say to you."
"What is it?"
"In terms of perfection, Champon[7] noodles are the best."
"—Eh?"
Homura was startled by this unexpected statement.
"I'm saying that I don't acknowledge Sapporo's salt ramen as the most perfected dish."
So she was talking about ramen. Now that she mentioned it, that topic had come up in conversation during her visit to Toneri's lab[8].

“But come on, this is Champon you’re talking about. Isn’t it a completely different dish?”
“Not Champon, Champon noodles.”
“Are you talking about the instant noodles kind? Do you usually eat those, Kanae-san? Where do you buy them?” asked Homura relentlessly, straying from the main point of the conversation.
“They don’t sell them at convenience stores. Right, I guess you don’t see them much in Kanto—Well, though it’s not a match for Champon noodles, I suppose the Sapporo miso ramen that they sell next to it on the shelves might be equal to its sister product cabbage ramen.”
Kanae aggressively thrusted her brush across the web stone floor.
“Hah? Cabbage?”
Homura used her foot to stop the washbasin that came sliding fast at her from Kanae.
“No, no, I can’t overlook what you just said… It’s true that miso ramen has some amazing applications. I admit that. There are times when even I want to eat lots of it. But in terms of perfection as a product, salt ramen definitely wins by a landslide.”
As she gave this mysterious explanation, Homura sent the washbasin sliding back at Kanae.
“I’ve actually eaten all of them and had the chance to analyze and compare them, you know?”
“You went that far? In that case, I’ll do the same when I return home. Can I buy that Champon stuff on the net?”
“I told you, it’s called Champon noodles!”
The washbasin relay continued, until they eventually realized that their hands had stopped working.
Returning to their senses, they went back to cleaning.
……
After the silence resumed for a while, Homura tentatively spoke up.
“Hey, Kanae-san… Would it be alright if I called you Yuri-chan? And I’d be happy if you called me Homura too…”
“…I don’t mind.”
“Really!? Thank goodness. It’s just, Akiho-kun always calls you that, and Misasagi-senpai also—”
The moment she heard Misasagi’s name, Kanae’s expression greatly stiffened, and Homura belatedly realized her mistake and freaked.
As if to take advantage of Homura’s panic, Kanae leaned against her brush handle with a sadistic gleam in her eyes.
“I don’t really care if you call me Yuri or Yuri-chan. If you feel self-satisfaction in talking over-familiarly to others like that, fine. If you want to appeal to everyone that you’re not isolated in the Exploration Club, be my guest. I won’t lose anything by you using me like that.”
“……That wasn’t my intention…” Homura began to say, before shaking her head. “…Sorry. I did think that way a little.”

Homura sat down on the edge of the cypress bathtub she'd just finished cleaning.
"I guess I'm feeling impatient. The more I plunge into Exploration Club activities, the more I feel the distance between me and the other kids in my class widen bit by bit. I can't attend my friend's concerts either. I sometimes wonder whether it's really all right for me to be here…"
"……I see."
Walking right up to Homura, Kanae then spoke words that seemed to claw at Homura's throat with sharp nails and tear out her heart.
"Seiran must be quite an easygoing place. I can tell just by looking at you, Hinooka-san."
"……"
Kanae's smile became even colder.
"Are you mad, *Homura*? Are you fine with this? You're staying silent because you can't fool yourself, right? To you, the Exploration Club is probably a fun group of friends. But it's different for me. However, as long as you don't get in my way, I'm fine with playing along with making the precious memories you value so much."
Kanae was provoking her on purpose. She'd even discarded her usual cool attitude. But Homura didn't think that Kanae was getting anything of value out of conversing so challengingly towards someone like her. So then why? That question plagued Homura.
"Kanae… Sorry. Y-Yuri-chan, what is the Exploration Club to you, then?"
"Reality."
Despite the vagueness of Homura's question, Kanae answered immediately.
"—'Maybe there's something else besides this.' I've never had the time to think deeply about things like that. From the start, I've never had the option of *wondering to myself sometimes*."
Reality? This is reality?
Homura couldn't hold back her shock at Kanae's attitude and words, which stabbed right into her soul. Even so, as if the retort came naturally, words that had been lurking in Homura's heart for a while now came out of Homura's mouth.
"T-The Exploration Club isn't the only reality…"
Those words came from the currently absent Inari Sunao—*"Don't let yourselves be misled by the impression that Nutella is the only reality."*
Even now, Homura still didn't understand the true meaning behind that warning…
"Look who's talking big now."
With a derisive snort, Kanae backed off.
Homura was a bit relieved. If Kanae's eyes had closed in on her any further, she didn't know what her mouth might say.
The two of them went back to cleaning. After a little while, Kanae suddenly murmured, "But still… If you keep your meddling to the level of taking my soy sauce…"

“Let’s go to a ramen shop together,” replied Homura.
—After briefly exchanging grins, the two of them resumed cleaning
Now then, back to Misasagi and the others.
They were just learning about the lifestyle of Nutellans through Subaru-hime.
Four human-sized puppets appeared in front of the deserted building the group was waiting at. They carried stripped cedar logs on their shoulders.
The club members greeted the puppets with a mixture of surprise, curiosity and some unease.
“These are puppets.”
There was no trace of ostentation in Subaru’s words.
Misasagi and Touya were already familiar with these wooden puppets.
At first glance, they resembled the kind of dolls used for rough sketches in art, but these ones were more elaborately made. Gears were deftly attached to their knees and shoulders, giving them the same freedom of mobility as humans.
The four puppets had easily carried the heavy logs, which even an adult might break their back carrying, across the slope to reach here.
“From right to left, their names are Kumagorou, Hachigorou, Sadakira and Gonsuke. They have wooden tags around their necks to display their names.”
“Yeah, I can somehow manage to differentiate them,” said Kamikoma while holding back laughter.
This was because the puppets each had a distinct humorous face. Seeing corn mustaches and other similar accessories attached to the smooth and curved wooden surface made them look like something right out of a puppet show.
“S-Suzu was the one who did all that graffiti. I left them like that because it would be a pain to clean them off. Pay it no mind.”
After clearing her throat in embarrassment, Subaru gave orders to the puppets.
“Put the logs down on that vacant land over there and stay on standby.”
“She mistook me for one of those things…?” said Touya depressingly.
Next to him, Ameno looked at the puppets with a complicated expression.
“What’s wrong, Ameno? You okay?” asked Touya.
“……”
“Ameno?”
“Ah, yes. It’s just… seeing these things fills me with a strange feeling.”
Touya quietly looked at Ameno.
Kamikoma then asked Subaru another question.
“Subaru-hime—We’re quite grateful for this, but aren’t these tools used to support your daily life? Is it all right for us to borrow them?”
“Tis fine. Ye should grow accustomed to it, if ye are to build a base in this land.”
Subaru immediately began explaining how to use the puppets.

“They do not simply obey any commands they hear, but respond to certain code phrases related to specific jobs. I informed Mayo of the code needed for construction work—bag carrying, sawing, wood-chopping, stone-gathering, weeding, drawing water, tilling the rice fields, tanning leather, and rope-fastening. There are other code phrases, but they won’t accept them from anyone other than me.”
Nanakubo folded her arms and expressed her honest amazement.
“So they’re macro-registered. Seems like the kind of gadget that Kanae would like.”
“This is just a hypothetical, but what if we give the wrong order and the puppets go berserk?” asked Hayase.
“Tis good to be cautious—but even if thee gave them a sickle and ordered them to reap the harvest, they would never cut a person standing in front of them. They would automatically avoid thee, and if that were not possible, they would come to a stop. Of course, if thee try something like putting thy hand beneath their hatchet as they swing it down, you would certainly be hurt. Do not try anything rash.”
Hayase nodded in understanding, and Subaru continued with her explanation.
“…This should never happen, but if they should refuse to listen to ye even if ye grab their arms and order them to stop, ye should immediately destroy them without hesitation. But that too is a difficult feat—Kumagorou.”
The puppet in question walked over to stand in front of Subaru.
After a moment of slight hesitation, Subaru revealed one of the puppet’s greatest secrets.
“There is a ‘stone of power’ imbedded in the wooden tag around the neck. If this is removed from their bodies, the puppets will return to being mere wooden dolls.”
She took off the tag, causing the puppet to let out a light creak and collapse to the ground.
Subaru then handed the tag to Kamikoma. Kamikoma and Nanakubo carefully observed it together.
“‘Stone of power’, huh… Looks to be a Rank Three or Four stone,” said Kamikoma in a whisper.
“…Can’t believe she just handed over something so valuable. So this is the core of the puppets. Automatons that run on spirit stones. Seems like their Ameno’s senpais.”
“U-Umm…” Ameno spoke up timidly. “…The puppets are able to understand our words quite well. If they can understand words, can’t they talk as well?”
That was a natural question.
However, Subaru’s response was extremely cold.
“They do not ‘understand’. They have no will, nor hearts that feel. They merely repeat the actions that they were first taught upon creation. They cannot do anything else. Even if they are broken, they can be repaired. There is no need to show them consideration like a human. However…”

Subaru took back the tag and returned it to the puppet's neck, causing Kumagorou to immediately stand back up.
"Puppets are convenient tools, but treat them carefully. Absolutely do not try any mischief on them like Suzuran."
—After seeing Misasagi and the others start the construction work on the deserted building, Touya and Nanakubo headed to the waterfall upstream of the nearby river together.
First, they climbed the cliff path behind the castle and set traps in various places along the river as they went.
The traps consisted of netted *wicker baskets* for capturing fish that they'd brought with them from Earth.
"You think we'll catch any fish?" wondered Touya.
"We'll catch lots, I guarantee it. Nutellan fish are complete suckers for this kind of thing. There have been times when baskets got so full that they broke and the fish all ran away."
"Heeh~…Wait, isn't that pretty bad?"
Even after finishing with the traps, Nanakubo continued climbing the path along the river.
She seemed to be carefully observing the mountain path, which was unusually maintained for a path on Nutella.
"There's a rope bridge ahead. The path continues up to there."
"Really? I can't believe there's still such a nice road to be found on Nutella."
Nanakubo crouched down and looked at the rocks lining the side of the road.
"…By the way, Nanakubo-senpai. I see that you still keep your glasses on."
"Idiot. If you took away my glasses, the only thing I'd have left is my beautiful looks. Just kidding. It's unfortunate, but even the magical land of Nutella can't cure my nearsightedness. That's how just goes to show how amazing I am, I guess. Well, in exchange for that…"
"…What?"
"Well, whatever. You'll figure it out soon enough. Oh, chestnut trees. There really aren't any large animals around here! Let's take as many nuts as we can carry. All right, it's chestnut picking time! Come on, don't just space out, Touya, take out a basket and tongs."
Nanakubo energetically ran across the fringe of the mountain ridge and spent a while simply kicking at the trunks of chestnut trees.
"Hey, that's dangerous—Ah, I told you so."
Though embarrassed at the childlike vigor of his senpai, Touya took out tools from his sack and began to make preparations.
While waiting for the catches from their traps, Touya and Nanakubo used their shoes to crush the chestnuts they gathered and passed the time by taking out the burrs from them.
After a while, Nanakubo made a confession.
"The truth is, I'm not suited for plain work like remodelling a dilapidated building."

“Wait, was the real reason you chose this job to get away from the castle?” Nanakubo grinned.
“Since I’ve come all the way out here anyway, I have to confirm the topography of this area and the like with my own eyes. We might find Nutellan ruins outside of that castle, you know.”
“What, if that’s the case, you should have brought Ameno along.”
“…Well, it’s not like I don’t understand her feelings. Even for a robot, she must be happy coming to Nutella for the first time.”
Nanakubo suddenly looked up at the Bagel in the sky.
Touya glanced at Nanakubo from the corner of his eye while continuing to crush the chestnut burrs.
“There we go… You know, maybe we could have asked those puppets to remove the chestnut burrs instead. And they could serve as convenient sources of motive power. Like, they could charge a dynamo with their arms or power cycle cars with their legs.”
“…But that’s a problem in its own right. They pretty much negate the entire reason for Ameno’s existence.”
Touya got angry at those words.
“No, impossible. That could never happen. Ameno can analyze a situation with her own judgement and can even converse better than some humans, so they’re completely different.”
“Really? Ameno is too capable. So much so that I’d want her as my little sister. A humanoid Nutellan investigation unit might be good for publicity, but the higher-ups back home don’t think that way. They obviously prefer tools that don’t talk—Wow, these burrs are hard.”
“It’s easier if you step on them with your heel—The higher-ups, huh? You mean people like our club’s advisor Fujimori-sensei, right?”
“Fujimori-san is different. She’s the exact opposite, actually.”
“…How is she different?”
“Stupid. Use your own head to think about that. Regardless, if they manage to perfect the technology to turn low-rank spirit stones, which are easier to find, into robots, Ameno will be out of a job. You don’t need the engine of a Ferrari for something that can be done with a scooter. That princess probably already knows that technology, too.”
“……Is that so?” asked Touya dubiously. “I don’t really—”
“What’s wrong?”
Seeming to have noticed something, Touya suddenly stood up.
His gaze was glued in the direction of the mountain ridge.
A pack of grey wolves that they hadn’t seen among the others this morning was running through the autumn-colored forest.
“—It’s Yukiwarimaru.”
Leading the pack was Yukiwarimaru.
Her pure white fur shone like sunlight within the darkness of the forest.
As the two of them followed the magnificent wolf with their eyes, the pack changed direction and ran over to the two humans.

“Why are they coming over here…?”
Like yesterday’s reception, the wolves showed no hostility.
However, their leader Yukiwarimaru came right up close to Nanakubo while carefully staring at her, and then suddenly brought her nose up to sniff her chest.
“Uu…”
Nanakubo was speechless before the impact of seeing a huge wolf right in front of her.
As she instinctively back away, Yukiwarimaru circled around her as if to observe her in greater detail. The giant wolf only showed interest towards Nanakubo, not even glancing at Touya.
“Hey, wait… Stop…”
Overwhelmed by the sharp glint in the wolf’s eyes, Nanakubo staggered and fell on her behind.
But eventually, Yukiwarimaru moved her nose away and moved off to return to the castle with her pack.
Now alone again, Nanakubo sank down to the ground with a slump and Touya simply stood there in daze.
“Phew… I thought I was gonna be eaten.”
Touya also breathed a sigh of relief and then approached Nanakubo in concern.
“She was probably already full. She likely stored food for her children in her stomach.”
“Ugh.”
Parent wolves had the habit of spitting out their stomach contents to feed their cubs.
“But her behavior just now was a bit odd,” said Touya in a puzzled tone.
Nanakubo pressed her hands against her head to calm down her rapid heartbeat. Finally noticing that her current position left the interior of her skirt partially exposed, she frantically fixed her posture and sat cross-legged to hide her embarrassment.
“Hey, Touya… Does that big white wolf have the ability to sense magical energy?”
As the hand he raised to help Nanakubo stand up fell back meaninglessly to his side, Touya shrugged.
“Her name is Yukiwarimaru… But yeah, I did get that impression from my previous encounter with her. I think she can sense magical energy.”
“Amazing. I suppose she ain’t a familiar for nothing. It gave me quite a start when that little cub barked at Ameno yesterday too.”
As she spoke, Nanakubo suddenly unzipped the front of her exploration outfit and slightly exposed part of her chest. She grinned at the dubious face Touya made.
“Just kidding,” she mischievously said.
Nanakubo took out a thin chain necklace that hung from her neck. At first confused, Touya then widened his eyes at the precious item attached to it.

“That’s a Transport Ring! Is that the one for the Nutellan deserted island?”
“Bingo. What, you already know about it? Damn that Homura… But yeah, this is the Transport Ring for transporting from Ufara Beach on Iriomote Island. I brought it with me on a hunch.”
“A hunch…?”
Nanakubo didn’t say anything further about it then and there.
—A while later, Touya and Nanakubo returned to the area around the castle.
Just as Nanakubo had declared, the traps they set in the river caught an astonishingly huge number of fish.
They triumphantly returned to the others while carrying netted baskets filled with fresh salmon in their hands and baskets of chestnuts on their backs.
Along the way to the castle itself, they passed by the deserted building in the middle of construction, and Nanakubo called out to the busy club members.
“Hey, we’ve got a big catch! There weren’t any eels, but we caught lots of salmon and river shrimp!”
Unfortunately, the other members were too exhausted to think of hunger and merely weakly replied in tired voices. Touya felt a bit guilty over having been the only one taking it easy. Nanakubo called out a second time.
“Koma-san! President Misasagi! It’ll be raining starting tomorrow night!”
“Ugh, seriously?”
Upon hearing Nanakubo’s warning, Kamikoma looked up at the sky with a dust-covered face.
She slapped the back of Saho who was drinking water next to her and spurred on the others with a shout. “Hurry up, you guys!”
Calming down Kamikoma, Misasagi added a comment of her own.
“It’s fine if we don’t push ourselves. But we have to rethink our construction plan.”
The sun was starting to set as well.
They decided to end work for the day.
Last night, Homura and the others had slept in sleeping bags within a castle hall that Subaru prepared for them. They’d all slept together in a huddle, gender differences ignored. (Ameno had slept in the stables alone, though.)
Most of the castle’s rooms were made of marble, but this hall had pine planks covering the floor, similar to a huge kendo hall.
However, it seemed that tonight would be different. Homura, Kanae and Ameno, who joined up with the two girls in the castle, had arranged for a bedroom for female club members. They didn’t have any soft and comfy futons, but they had set rice straw over the floor where there had originally been iron bed frames, covered the straw with the sheets they’d brought from Earth, and created rice straw beds that mimicked the wheat straw beds of Medieval Europe.

“Sorry for this. The only proper sets of bedding I have are the ones for myself and Suzu. I apologize for the inconvenience.”
Subaru apologized as she came into the room, but Misasagi shook her head saying, “Not a problem.”
Illuminated by oil lamps, the room was filled with the fragrant smell of rice straw.
“We’re only using this room temporarily until we move to the base camp, so it’s more than enough,” said Misasagi. “We have our own sleeping bags too.”
“What kind of futon do you use, Subaru-hime?” asked Homura from the side.
“What kind, thee ask? One made from the down feathers of waterfowls, naturally.”
“All right! From now on, I’m living in this castle!”
“Don’t get won over by a mere down quilt futon,” retorted Nanakubo.
Smiling at their boisterousness, Subaru sat down on a nearby bed.
She caressed it with her hand while murmuring.
“Ye truly are quite skilled and efficient, in both house-building and food provision. Ye even flawlessly used the puppets despite seeing them for the first time.”
“Thank you for the compliment,” said Misasagi with a bow of her head.
“What of the male members? I did not see them in the hall,” asked Subaru.
“They’ve gone to the open-air bath that Homura-san and Kanae-san cleaned.”
“What, the boys went in first? Isn’t the saying ‘ladies’ first’? Well, whatever,” grumbled Nanakubo as she immediately went to lay with her limbs splayed out on one of the beds.
Kamikoma then jumped backwards and flopped right on top of her.
“Guh!”
“All right, let’s rest for a bit and then go prepare supper. Let’s all work just a little bit more~”
“Eh, then when are we going into the bath? And after I worked hard to clean it too…”
“Don’t lament yet, Homura. Those guys worked hard too,” said Kamikoma with a wry smile to the discontent Homura. “Can you go call Kanae and Ameno before we go to the kitchen?”
“Ah, Koma-san.” As Koma stood up, Nanakubo called out to her. “I’ve already prepared the fish and cuts for cooking in the kitchen—We’ll be having grilled salmon with chestnut rice tonight. I can’t wait~. Can we make the shrimp into tempura? Do you have oil for deep-fried food, Subaru-san?”
“Yes, feel free to use the sesame oil in the kitchen.”
“Heeh, that’s great. That steamed rice with wild plants we had yesterday was tasty too. This place really is just like a traditional salon restaurant. Do you accept cash?”

“It really was quite delicious, so much so that I can’t believe it was made with mushrooms,” agreed Homura.
“Is that so? Then perhaps I should open up an inn here,” said Subaru proudly.
Just as Homura was about the leave the room with the others, Homura suddenly came to a stop.
“Err, by the way, where’s Kanae-san…?”
“She apparently went down to the stables,” said Kamikoma.
“Ah…”
Kanae seemed to have gone over there at some point without Homura noticing.
Homura felt herself terribly heartless for having left Ameno down there.
From the other end of the room, Misasagi sent Homura a wink that seemed to say, ‘I leave it to you.’
Subaru silently watched this little exchange between the girls from the side.
After having a lively dinner—
All the female members headed to the long-awaited open-air bath.
It couldn’t be kept heated twenty-four hours day like with boilers on Earth. Bathing time was precious here due to requiring the use of a hot water kettle heated by fire. Incidentally, Touya was in charge of heating the hot water kettle after winning at rock-paper-scissors, while the other boys were on after-dinner cleanup duty. As for which job came with the best benefits… That depended on the person in question.
Within the castle tower, the bathroom was dimly lit, with the lamps in the changing room purposefully placed far off.
The Bagel, now on the dark side of Nutella, shone brilliantly above the silhouette of the nearby mountain ridge like a tall, pure-white mountain range in the night sky.
“This bath is great!” exclaimed Ameno in wonder as she gazed at the open-air bath with its superb outside view.
The other girls were sitting on washing stools, while Ameno was standing around looking here and there in a towel.
“Ameno, is there any point to you taking a bath?” asked Nanakubo while narrowing her eyes due to her near-sightedness.
Ameno laughed bashfully.
“I’m basically maintenance-free… and dirt falls off me as long as I bask in light… But I’ve been looking forward to this bath. So that’s why I’m here.”
“Fine with me. Feel free to wash off as much sweat or machine oil as you like.”
“Yeah, Ameno-san does deserve a reward for all the hard work she’s done,” said Misasagi.
“Not at all, president. I only did as I was instructed. I still have a long ways to go…”
“For some reason, hearing that really hurts my ears.”

Homura dumped hot water from a wooden bucket over her head and then placed her hands on Ameno's shoulders to push her over to the washing area.
"…Wawa, Homura-san?"
"I feel really bad about not being with you so much today, Ame-chan. Come on, let me wash your back."
"I-I'm just fine, thank you. You're the one who worked hard cleaning and setting up the room, Homura-san. Ah, and you arranged a bed for me…"
"Still in the stables, though. Shall I go sleep there too? —Oh, I found a twig in your hair. I have to make sure to wash it thoroughly."
Homura had helped make a bed for Ameno down in the stables.
"Please don't start talking like Akado-san."
"Eh, what's that supposed to mean? Ah, and also… Y-Yuri-chan helped make your bed too. Right?"
Ameno immediately expressed her thanks, but Kanae kept her back to them and showed no reaction. Her pointed tail didn't twitch either from where it hung from her tight butt. A stray cat was more civil and sociable than her.
Homura shrugged and turned back to Ameno.
"Is this your first time in an open-air bath, Ame-chan?"
"Yes! Ah, but I do know about them."
"So you can tell this one is unique?"
"Yes. Its design is quite different from the standard ones in Japan. At first glance, its style looks Japanese, but the basic design is similar to the traditional Roman-style baths, like how the ventilation is constructed or how it receives water from upstream of a waterfall."
"Roman-style… Wait, so this is a luxurious Roman bath? Like… what's it called again? 'Thermae Romae[9]'?"
"Yeah, that. A thermae."
Kamikoma spoke up as she dipped her feet into the bathtub with Misasagi.
"Public bathhouses, or thermae, have been discovered in several ruins in this area, particularly in places using marble construction. Based on the remaining evidence, they seem to have been pretty important facilities within each town."
"Heeh, so Nutellans went to super-bathhouses too. That's a bit unexpected."
"It's a logical custom," murmured Kanae.
"Yeah, you can just leave the hot water kettles inside the house and avoid accidental house fires," said Nanakubo.
"That's the reason? Hmm… I think it's because they really enjoyed the baths since it revitalized their spirits. If not, there's no way they'd keep maintaining it."
For once, Homura expressed an unexpectedly serious opinion.
Soon, someone new appeared in the changing room.
Homura reflexively stiffened at the silhouette and sounds in the other room, thinking, *Did one of the boys (or rather, one boy in particular) come to*

peek!?, but such caution was unnecessary. Rather, the person in question was one that filled her with even more tension than a mere boy.
The glamorous silhouette behind the thin veiled entrance to the changing room behind was none other than that of this castle's mistress.
"—Pardon mine intrusion."
Her nearly transparently white-skinned naked body was covered by a madder-red dyed cotton bathrobe.
"S-Subaru-san? P-Please come in."
Homura wasn't the only one startled by Subaru's appearance.
Naturally, there was no way they could deny her entry here. Homura glimpsed Ameno tensely correct her posture on the wooden stool in front of her.
"The temperature seems good," said Subaru.
"Thank you for letting us use this bath. It's really recharging our spirits for tomorrow," said Kamikoma.
Subaru nodded proudly several times. Her behaviour seemed a bit off.
She suddenly looked at Homura.
"—Tis Ameno here?"
"Ah, yes!" replied Ameno as she sprang to her feet.
"Wash mine hair. I leave the hair-combing to thee as well."
After unilaterally declaring that, Subaru sat down in a corner of the washing area.
"Yes, it'd be my pleasure."
"Wait, wait, wait, Ame-chan? And Subaru-hime too—"
How can you just obediently go along with a sudden request to wash her hair? Such flustered thoughts filled Homura, but before she could do anything, Misasagi quietly touched her arm and held her back. She leaned out of the bathtub and subtly shook her head at Homura.
Eh… Senpai?
Homura was left consumed, unable to understand Subaru and senpai's intentions.
Meanwhile, Ameno readjusted the towel around her chest and faithfully followed Subaru's order.
"Then, please excuse me~"
First, Ameno ran her fingers through Subaru's braided hair and carefully untied the braids so as not to cause any pain. Subaru raised her chin aloofly and let Ameno do her work.
Still wearing a concerned expression, Homura moved her stool over next to them.
After exchanging looks with Ameno, who was enthusiastically handling Subaru's hair, Homura timidly spoke up.
"Umm~, Subaru-san, this might just be a trick of the lamplight, but isn't your face a bit red…? Did you go in the sauna earlier?"
"'Sauna'? The steam bath, thee mean? No, I have not."
"…Ah, this scent… Were you perhaps drinking alcohol?"

A sweet scent wafted off the red-faced Subaru that wasn't just from her makeup.
"I… I am not drunk. I did have a bit of sake after dinner, but I am most certainly not drunk."
—*She's drunk,* mentally retorted Homura.
Looking behind her, Homura saw that Kamikoma and Misasagi, who were peeking over at them in interest from the bathtub, were nodding as well, clearly thinking, *She's definitely drunk.* and *…She's drunk.* respectively.
"You're drunk!" Nanakubo harshly pointed out with her actual voice.
"Weren't your legs unsteady when you came in?" She showed no mercy at all.
"…T-Tis not a problem. I will be going to bed immediately after this."
"It's fine."
Subaru remained still as Ameno treated her hair. Once it was unbraided, her long hair was lifted up and dipped into a small washbasin filled with hot water.
"…Thee seemed quite accustomed to this."
"Yes!"
"Eh, really, Ame-chan?" asked Homura.
"Yeah, washing hair and helping others bath is an important job of mine. Akado-san's grandma complimented me on my skills!"
"Ah, I see. Now that you mention it."
Homura recalled that Ameno wasn't just a Nutellan investigation unit, but was also used as a caretaking robot.
"But this is my first time washing such long and beautiful hair… I wonder if I can do it well?"
"Be quiet."
"Yes! —Does it itch anywhere?"
"……Like I said…"
Ameno's nervousness seemed to have faded a bit as she did work that she was used to.
Homura spoke while washing her own body next to them.
"Subaru-san, did Suzuran-chan use this open-air bath a lot?"
"Indeed… is what I would like to say, but that child always hated taking big baths even when she was covered in dirt from running out in the fields. During summer, she always went to the river to bath. Though, once the season turned this cold, I made her give up and use this bath. I lured her in by floating apples in the bath."
"Heh, an apple bath, huh? Sounds wonderful."
The faint smell of alcohol wafting off Subaru also had the scent of apples mixed within it.
After Ameno finished washing Subaru's hair, Homura went over to the huge bathtub with the two of them.
When Subaru removed her bathrobe, it revealed a spirit stone hanging against her chest from a leather strap.

Kamikoma and Nanakubo widened their eyes in surprise, but Homura was completely fascinated by the sight of Subaru's beauty.
Subaru sat down on the edge of the bathtub with her back to the stone wall. She calmly gazed over the faces of the others girls, illuminated by the Bagel's light, and the night sky filled with twinkling stars while cooling off her body, which was plenty hot from the heat of the bath.
Her drunkenness seemed to have faded a bit.
She gave off the impression that she didn't have a strong alcohol tolerance nor drank very often.
Subaru suddenly murmured to herself.
"This makes me remember mine days as a young girl."
"Your childhood, Subaru-san…?" questioned Misasagi.
Subaru nodded. Her gaze drifted towards the distant land surrounding the castle.
"Downstream of this river and far beyond the mountains, there was a village called 'Douvre[10]' where the main roads intersect. I spent a short season as a young girl there."
"Douvre… A Nutellan village…" Misasagi's breath caught reflexively. "If you spent time in that village, then does that mean it was like the boarding houses in our culture—or in Edo period terms, a clan school?"
Subaru nodded at Misasagi's question.
Both Kamikoma who was sitting on the edge of the tub next to Misasagi and Nanakubo who was in the middle of stretching looked at Subaru with sharp gazes that didn't suit the atmosphere of the bath.
"Indeed, though it was a meager place that would likely disappoint thy expectations. Various people from this area gathered in Douvre."
A clan school was a public educational institution where the young children of samurai families enrolled and received harsh instruction in both the literary and martial arts.
"Originally, Douvre was a village founded by retainers of our clan who worked at this castle. There, mine aunt—mine mother's younger sister—was appointed as magistrate as part of her clan duties."
Both sorrow and nostalgia were mixed in the tone of Subaru's voice.
"Magistrate?" said Homura with a tilt of her head. "Does that have something to do with magic?"
"Err, a magistrate is what we would call a judge in modern terms," explained Ameno.
"Then, your aunt was a pure-blood Nutellan… right?"
Subaru nodded at Kamikoma's question.
"—I lived in Douvre for a time with mine aunt as mine guardian, where I studied and made a modest number of friends. Though mine aunt was called a magistrate, it was basically a leisurely honorary position. Because of that, mine aunt also served as a teacher there. I learned many things from her alongside mine friends. Mathematica was one of those subjects she taught me…"

As she said that, Subaru's hand softly touched the spirit stone over her chest.
"Mathematica? What's that?" said Nanakubo curiously in response to the strange-sounding word. "…Ah, I get it… Mathematics? What's with the sudden use of English!?"
"It's Latin. It's the root word of mathematics," murmured Kanae.
"I-I knew that."
Subaru chuckled. She silently dipped her fingers into the bath.
"At first… I merely learned small child's play like this…"
"Ah," said Ameno as her breath caught.
In front of her, a small sphere of bath water floated up into the air from the water surface.
The sphere silently hovered and turned into a lens that reflected everyone's faces.
Upon closer inspection, there was a thin string-like pillar connecting the bottom of the sphere with the bath water.
It was a modest display of magic on Subaru's part.
"…How nostalgic."
It's similar to Oozore's spell… but…
Homura felt something out of place about that mysterious display, but she wasn't able to immediately put it into words.
Misasagi scooped up some bath water with her hands. Spheres much smaller than Subaru's formed within her palms, and they jumped up into the air.
This was one of Misasagi's spells. Controlling water was her specialty.
The small spheres of water flew over to touch Subaru's sphere and stuck to it like magnets, circling around like satellites around a planet.
The next day, the construction of the camp proceeded smoothly as well.
But the fourth day of their stay at the castle was filled with rain right from the start of the morning.
Just as Nanakubo had said, the strong-winded rain that had started late the previous night kept coming down all day.
In anticipation of the rain, they had left some indoor work to do for today, but once they finished those, the club members were left bored with nothing to do.
As such, the boys were amusing themselves with card games in the hall to pass the time.
However, the club presidents apparently had other plans for the rain-filled day.
After finishing lunch preparations and joining the card game group for a while, Homura heard Momoyama-senpai said he had business to take care of at the castle watchtower, so she forcefully asked the older senpai to let her accompany him as he left the hall. Naturally, her objective was to participate in the club presidents' meeting.
On the watcher's terrace were Subaru, Misasagi, Kamikoma and Nanakubo.

“Oh, you came, Momoyama-kun. But why’s Homura with you?” asked Kamikoma in exasperation.
“I don’t play games I definitely can’t win.”
“The heck does that mean?”
The swells of rain clouds were passing swiftly over the mountain ridge. There were the usual tea set and teacakes on the terrace table.
“This is?” asked Homura.
“Pastries made of soy flour mixed with honey. I thought it would fit the tastes of young girls such as ye,” answered Subaru.
“Soy flour rice cakes! Thanks for the treat!”
“Just what exactly did you come here for anyway?”
On the table in front of the smiling Subaru was an open album.
Subaru was looking at photos that Misasagi had brought with her. Homura peeked at them curiously.
Subaru widened her eyes at the photo of Suzuran nervously wearing a middle school uniform.
“Hoh… This is quite… No… Anyone can look good with the right clothes. She doesn’t look like that wild girl at all,” said Subaru with a sigh of amazement. “So the woman beside her is her mother? She seems like a very kind woman.”
This was the first time Homura had seen the mother in a while as well. She was smiling with one hand on Suzuran’s shoulder. She seemed happy and healthy. Her hair was a bit longer now.
Subaru picked up another photo.
“Are these Suzu’s friends?”
“Ah, they’re her classmates at school, I think. Err, basically, her fellow students who study at the same temple school, I guess?” explained Homura.
“If you’re going to use temple schools as an example, you should bring up Fudeko[11]. Anyway, these two seem to be particularly close to Suzuran,” said Misasagi.
“I see…”
Subaru’s expression was filled with complicated feelings as she looked at the photo.
In the center of the photo, the short-statured Suzuran stood wearing a school uniform, with a tall, kind-looking and gallant girl and a docile-looking glasses-wearing girl about the same height as Suzuran nestled up to her on either side in the same uniform.
“Suzu-chan must have it tough…” Homura involuntarily leaked out her frank thoughts.
“Indeed,” said Subaru with a lonely nod. But at the same time, Homura was relieved to see this.
“But all girls have it tough, really. But if it’s Suzuran-chan, I’m sure she’ll be fine.”
“I see… If someone such as thee says so, it must be so.”
“Yeah… Wait, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“There is no hidden meaning to mine words.”
Even after putting the album down, Subaru kept glancing at it as she readjusted her sitting posture.
Kamikoma and Nanakubo turned around to face her and carefully broached the main topic of this meeting.
“—Ye wish to embark on an expedition towards the coast? That is thy next ‘mission’ then?”
“Yes.”
Kamikoma nodded.
“We members of the Hiyoshizaka Exploration Club mainly do long-distance expeditions to the northeast. As a result, we’ve neglected to explore our nearby surroundings.”
Subaru listened and urged her to continue.
“Momoyama-kun, please take it out.”
At Kamikoma’s order, Momoyama took out a huge map and spread it over the table.
Momoyama began to explain in a slightly nervous tone.
“This is a map of this local area. It’s made from the investigations results of both the Hiyoshizaka and Seiran clubs. This is the valley where this castle is, and this is Seiran High’s former base camp. This is the Hiyoshizaka High base camp—and the coast is on the northeast side of this map.”
The northeast area in the upper right corner of the map was almost entirely taken up by blank space.
Subaru looked over the map and nodded, impressed.
There were short, intermittent coastlines drawn here and there. But the investigated areas stopped and became interrupted partway through.
“The foundation of the areas drawn in faint colors is made from conjecture based on observations from Hollow Axis telescope satellites—basically telescopes that we launched into Earth’s sky—but as you can see, the telescopes can only distinguish between the coast and mainland at most, so we don’t have much information on the topography there.”
“The mountain range along the northeastern seaside is steep and precipitous for the most part,” said Subaru.
“…Yes. It’s impossible to move along the coast. In order to map any further past this, we need a large-scale boat. But we’re still not capable of making one here…”
“……”
Subaru turned silent.
Momoyama asked Subaru with a pleading gaze.
“Subaru-hime. Do you have a map of this area?”
This was Homura’s first time seeing the normally calm Momoyama-senpai so desperate.
“…Completing the making of this map is thine job. Tis fine to simply relinquish that to someone else?”
“What you say is true.”

…I see.
Homura finally understood the intentions of Kamikoma and the others.
—This was something that happened right after the beginning of their stay at this castle.
Kamikoma and Misasagi had strictly warned the other club members to never enter any unused area of the castle. Naturally, Subaru's personal room was out of the question as well.
That was an important rule needed in order to foster trust between them and the princess.
Even so, during their brief glancing around as they walked through the castle, they hadn't seen any rooms that looked like a 'library', where there might be records of Nutellan culture and history—as well as maps of Nutella.
Kamikoma picked up talking after Momoyama.
"We deeply want to venture beyond this area. Even a little bit of information would be appreciated. If we have a detailed map of this area, we can lower the risk of danger on our expeditions. I know that this defeats the purpose of our work as investigators, but…"
"…Well, let me be blunt. Do you have a Nutellan globe model or word atlas, Subaru-san?" asked Nanakubo, getting straight to the point.
Her question was so frank that Kamikoma and Misasagi jerked in surprise, but they couldn't deny that it was their wish as well.
This was probably the dearest wish of not only Japanese investigators, but of all investigators attached to the UNPIEP.
Subaru remained silent as she looked at the map.
"……"
Homura timidly reached out a hand to the plate of teacakes, but her hand was slapped away by Kamikoma.
"Aagh, t-these are quite tasty, you know?"
Watching as Kamikoma slid the plate away further down the table, Homura inwardly moaned, *The teacakes didn't do anything wrong!*
Ignoring this little skit, Misasagi calmly spoke up.
"Subaru-san, the town of Douvre that you spoke of… is this town here, correct?"
Misasagi took out several black-and-white photos and timidly handed them to Subaru, whose eyes immediately locked on them.
Though Misasagi called it a town, all that was left were abandoned ruins that consisted mainly of stone blocks scattered here and there.
"We found this site during a past expedition. We could tell that this town was lost in a huge fire. This happened several hundred years ago… Naturally, there was no one left living there."
Determining her assumption was correct based on Subaru's reaction, Misasagi continued.
"—This is where it is on the map." Misasagi pointed at a spot on the southern part of the map. "I discovered these ruins during a Seiran High

expedition alongside the previous club president… and another member called Inari.”
Subaru silently nodded.
“…Indeed, this rubble is the remains of Douvre.”
Homura was shocked at those words.
A single tear slid down Subaru’s cheek as she looked at the photo.
“I already knew that. There is no way I could forget. I was the one who burned Douvre to the ground, after all. Since then, I have never stepped foot there again.”
“…Eh…”
Homura and the others gulped at that shocking confession.
“What about your aunt who was a magistrate there…?”
Seeing through the fear behind Misasagi’s question, Subaru shook her head.
“…She did not die in that town. Mine aunt departed to a far off land along with the others from this castle.”
Homura didn’t know what had happened in Douvre, but she was relieved to hear that at least.
Subaru continued speaking.
“Are ye saying that ye wish to see even more abandoned towns like Douvre? That ye want maps no matter what?”
Subaru looked at Kamikoma and the others with a cross-examining gaze.
“—No, even if ye had maps, all the roads have fallen into ruin and become unusable. I have used spells on the stone-paved roads connected to this castle to prevent tree roots from extending through them. However, in the hinterlands where such repairs have not been kept up, the roads have long since been in a sea of stone weeds and cannot be distinguished from the rest of the wild fields.
“We’re fully aware of that. Even if we take into consideration the unpredictability of changes over the years, we can’t afford to overlook any measure of security we can get our hands on. If you have any maps, they have plenty of value to us.”
Kamikoma spoke with the utmost seriousness and sincerity. Momoyama agreed with her enthusiasm and drew closer to Subaru.
“In four months of Nutellan time and three weeks of Earth time, we will return here. We want to begin our expedition to the coast then.”
“That will be right in the midst of the heaviest time of snowfall.”
“Yes.”
Momoyama elaborated further.
“We’ll be using *snowshoes and sleds*, so the snow is actually convenient for us. Thanks to that, we can gently cross the most dangerous swamps in the mountains and streams that would be fast-moving and exhausting in the summer.”

“However, winter changes the landscape drastically. Tis not just the issue of getting lost, there are yet other dangers… but I suppose ye want maps as insurance against that as well.”
Subaru emphasized the dangers to show her resistance to the idea.
But even so, Kamikoma and Momoyama nodded.
Meanwhile, Homura was getting a bit excited at the conversation as she recalled photos of Himekawa and the members from Tomakomai Denpa playing winter sports.
“Heeh, so the next mission is a winter expedition on Nutella. Sounds fun. Can we do snowboarding too?”
Momoyama frowned with a troubled expression at Homura’s question.
“Umm, that might be a bit difficult.”
“Huh?”
Homura titled her head in puzzlement, so Misasagi gently explained it to her.
“Hinooka-san, we Seiran High members will continue to work on the base camp construction here. It’s not a job that we’ll be able to finish over the course of one mission. The Hiyoshizaka High members have their own duties to take care of.”
“I-I understand that… but…”
In truth, Homura had been thinking of everything in a very carefree manner.
Nanakubo was the one to deliver the final blow.
“Besides, Hinooka, you’re still a novice-rank investigator, right?”
“Yes, that’s true. What of it?”
“Novice-rank investigators can’t participate in winter expeditions. You have to be at least 5th rank and have a club president traveling with you. Ideally, you’d have to be around 4th rank to receive permission to join an expedition. You can’t go either way.”
“Eh, no way. But Fujimori-sensei said that ranks were simply something that the government arbitrarily decided.”
“We’re talking about the mountains in winter, you know? You wanna die? This is different from a sky trip while staying at a hot spring inn.”
“Uuu…”
Momoyama gazed sympathetically at the depressed Homura. He then looked over at Misasagi worriedly.
“But still, Misasagi. This is a mission in Seiran High’s designated area of explanation. Are you really fine with leaving this expedition to us?”
“……”
After a short silence, Misasagi nodded, looking forlorn.
Homura recognized the smile on her face.
…Senpai…
Homura was brought back to herself by their conversation and started to ponder over the meaning behind it.
After a period of contemplation, Subaru finally spoke up in a solemn tone.

“I understand thine request, Kamikoma-dono. I shall grant thee my maps. However, I have one condition—”
“C-Condition…?”
Kamikoma reflexively gulped.
All the Exploration Club members corrected their posture and listened carefully to Subaru’s condition.
Chapter 16 END

Just leave the construction
of the base camp to me!

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

(1) "Wolf Taking Along Its Child" is the direct translation of a Japanese title more commonly known in English as "Lone Wolf and Cub", a famous Japanese story that started out as a manga in the 1970s and had several adaptations into films and televisions series.

(2) Genshiko is a name that literally means "Phantom Limb Tiger", which is part of the title of this Volume, "Phantom Limb Tiger of the White Peak".

(3) Kamigata: The old name for the Kansai region in the Edo period.

(4) Naniwa is the old name for the Osaka region. Ebisu is a district in Shibuya ward, Tokyo, which is renowned for its bars and restaurants, and is also the name of a Japanese god of luck.

(5) The Japanese word Misasagi uses for "cluster of crop/plant heads" here is "Homura", the same as our female protagonist's name in both pronunciation and kanji spelling.

(6) TSPC, mentioned in the previous volume, stands for "Trans Spirit Possessed Case", a sub-category of Trans among investigators. The kanji beneath the English word Diabolo reads as "demonic race".

(7) Champon is noodle dish that is a regional cuisine of Nagasaki, Japan.

(8) Reference to a comment Homura made in Vol 2-1, Chapter 11.

(9) Thermae Romae: roughly translates to "Roman bathhouse". Thermae were large facilities for bathing in ancient Rome. (Also, Thermae Romae is the name of a manga about a Roman architect who discovers a time tunnel to a modern Japanese bathhouse and uses the innovations he finds there to create his own spa in the past.)

(10) Douvre: pronounced "DOU-BU-RE" in Japanese. "Douvre" is simply my best guess on its English spelling since the pronunciation sounds somewhat French. (Another possibility is "double", but I went with "Douvre" to distinguish it.)

(11) Most likely referring to Ishii Fudeko (1861-1944), a pioneer of modern education for Japanese girls, and one of the first founders of welfare for people with mental disabilities in Japan.

Chapter 17

“Thou are ‘Yamada’, Touya-dono.”
“—Huh?” said Touya with a mystified face.
“Excellent. Ameno—thou are ‘Yamada’ as well.”
“Yes, ma’am!”
Subaru handed both of them brightly colored cotton kimonos.
“I feel like I’ve seen these before…” Touya tilted his head in puzzlement even after putting on the kimono.
Homura expressed her wonder and admiration at Ameno’s appearance.
“Ooh, you really do look like a Yamada~”
“Really?”
Ameno was suddenly in high spirits.
Floor cushions had been brought out for everyone to sit on.
A small stage had been set up in a spacious, hardwood room.
A single floor cushion was placed at the center of the stage. Touya stared at it fixedly.
Even he could grasp what was going on at this point.
“Ah, this is Yamada[1]! I’m Yamada-kun!”
“That’s what she said, isn’t it?” retorted Homura in a reversal of their usual roles.
The small stage was a Rakugo performance stage.
Yes—the condition that Subaru had made was ‘for everyone to sit and listen to the Rakugo performance Subaru had personally made’.
Naturally, they hadn’t had the time to prepare a name stand beside the stage, but if there was one, it would probably say ‘Subaru of the Misasagi House’ or ‘~Subaryun~ of the Iotsumisumaru House’.
While feeling strangely tense, all the club members had gathered in the room and sat down in front of the stage. Then, thrilling music—the instrument was a lute, but the melody was unlike the standard ones used by minstrels—began playing from the side of the stage.
Naturally, the lute was being strummed by Kamikoma, who Subaru had asked, or rather pleaded, to perform a piece suitable for Rakugo.
Janjaja, jajajaja, janjan—pepen!
Janjaja, jajajaja, janjan—pepen!
Rather than Rakugo music, the tune she was playing was more like the music from the Shoten[2] TV program… “That’s the only tune similar to Rakugo music that I know, so it can’t be helped!” was the excuse Kamikoma had given.
Not knowing any of this, Subaru entered the room with a cheerful gait.
The audience greeted her with clapping, and today’s performance finally began.

Now then, the title of the story was—
‘Star God’.
“They say the path between men and women is distant yet short, while the path to the countryside is short yet distant[3].
“There are various paths both short and long between the many tenement houses across Edo as well.
“And at one particularly unusual tenement, a four-way crossroads was expanded into a five-way crossroads.
“As thee can imagine, the view and visibility was poor there. After all, the streets were always so crammed and packed you couldn’t see ahead on the road.
“Oh, how inconvenient it was. Every day, there would be collisions involving wild boars, deer and horses, until finally, the beasts would crash their heads against the corner of the intersection and collapse there.
“One night, Toukira, who lived in the tenement house at the crossroads, came out, wondering whether he would have boar meat, venison or horse-meat hotpot tonight.
“But what is this? At the corner of the intersection, he found a collapsed woman.
“Beasts are naturally stupid, so they do not look ahead, but to think a human would crash here.
“Toukira shrugged. ‘This certainly does not look like it would cook well in a pot.’
“But at that moment, the woman’s eyes blinked open——”
Amazing… She’s really good at this.
—Touya was amazed by Subaru’s Rakugo acting.
Naturally, she wasn’t on par with professional Rakugo storytellers, and there were some scenes that were a bit embarrassing, which naturally made him and the other audience members feel embarrassed as well.

But the fact that she was able to perform so flawlessly was surely thanks to the education from her father, Misasagi Yoshizumi. She had also had the chance to practice in front of Suzuran as well.
Touya had brought along several Rakugo books at Subaru's request during his last visit.
He had gone to libraries, researched on the net and personally chosen the books himself.
At the end, the books had been examined by their club's director—Fujimori.
But…
"Boring—rejected."
"Aren't there different versions from other storytellers?"
Though some of his choices had been rejected for such highly subjective reasons, most of the books had been given the OK and brought to Nutella.
Rationally speaking, while Rakugo was a form of storytelling that came out in the Edo Period, the Rakugo that existed in modern times had been greatly rearranged and used very different vocabulary compared to back then, so it should have been vastly different from the Rakugo that Subaru knew.
This kind of modest present was apparently easy to handle and publicize as an episode connected to the famous Nutellan, who many were cautious about dealing with, so this matter was being actively endorsed by UNPIEP headquarters as well.
But on the other hand, there were also those criticized the present, believing that it was equivalent to destroying the precious Edo art and oral tradition that Subaru possessed.
However, if they religiously adhered to those concerns, they wouldn't be able to talk with Subaru in the first place. After all, that kind of destruction had already begun the moment she had encountered the modern Japanese that Touya and the others spoke.
Also, Touya was shocked by how quickly Subaru absorbed it all. She could read modern printed texts without difficulty. It took Touya a whole day just to peruse a single Edo-era book.
The Rakugo she was currently performing used vocabulary that Touya and the others could easily understand, demonstrating the knowledge she had gained from books and conversing with them.
"—'I'm sorry. I come from the stars in the sky, but I angered a god and was banished to Earth. I happened to see a familiar visage, and as I was giddily chasing after them, I heartily bumped my head against the intersection in the dead of night. But now that my true identity has been uncovered, I must disguise myself as a starfish of the sea'—"
Touya had never had much interest in Rakugo before, so he'd never visited those 'entertainment halls' where professional Rakugo storytellers performed their art in person instead of on a TV screen.
However, he felt his interest pique a little as he exchanged Rakugo stories and information with Subaru earlier.

When he listened to Subaru’s story, he could tell that she had the names of certain places in Edo jumbled together.
Subaru’s knowledge of old Edo was far more detailed than that of the modern Japanese person, but the geography she described was subtly off from the real thing, making Touya feel as if he was running around Edo on nimble feet as he listened.
Eventually, Touya figured out that Subaru’s story was based off the emotional story of the ‘Water God’ with her own unique modifications.
The ‘Water God’ was a story that began with a man, whose wife had left him and who now cared for his baby children alone, meeting a mysterious woman. The man and woman grew very close, but that woman was actually a messenger raven of the water god who had been turned into a human as punishment. And in the original story, the woman left the man after her true identity was revealed. And in the end…
“Toukira went to the sea and wept in sorrow. ‘Please give her back to me, o Star. I don’t care if you’re a star god or astray god, but don’t just separate us for some vague reason like this. After all, I don’t have enough hands to care for my five baby children. I don’t have enough hands. I don’t have enough hands. I need the hands of another[4].’
“—And that’s all from me.”
Chapter 17 END

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TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

(1) Yamada: a side-role in Rakugo. I am unfortunately unaware of the details.

(2) Shoten: A Japanese TV comedy program that is broadcast on Sunday evenings.

(3) Old Japanese proverb meaning that men and women seem distant and different from each other, but actually join together easily, in contrast to the countryside, which seems close to the city yet is greatly separated by the difference in culture.

(4) This is a pun that acts as the punchline to the story, but it can’t be properly translated in Japanese. Basically, the kanji for the phrase “hands of another person” is the same as the word “starfish”.

Chapter 18

The day after that night of Rakugo, the rain still had yet to abate.
Since their time here was limited, Kamikoma and Misasagi decided to resume work even if it meant getting a bit drenched.
One particularly dangerous job involved bringing down heavy stones from a wet scaffold set up along the building.
“I see ye are working hard.”
Subaru came out to check on them in the rain. She held an old-fashioned Japanese umbrella above her with the small Hatsuyuki following along at her feet.
“What, it’s just the princess…” complained Saho with a sigh. “I need Hinooka-san or at least Yuri-chan to come and bring us provisions, or else my motivation and vigor won’t rouse! My vigor in particular!”
“Keep your voice down, will you?” admonished Touya.
However, both Touya and Hayase felt similarly groggy from this hard work. Taga-senpai was demonstrating his incredible toughness as usual, though.
Unable to just sit back and watch, Subaru offered to assist with their dangerous work.
She used code phrases that she hadn’t taught the Exploration Club members and made several puppets do the work in their stead.
Despite having several puppets doing completely different actions simultaneously, she skillfully made them work in coordination with each other. Achieving such precision and coordination was impossible with just the code phrases that she’d taught the club members.
“You know… it’s kinda scary to watch…” murmured Saho as he watched the puppets work while drying his drenched hair with a towel that Ameno had provided.
“……”
Touya privately agreed with Saho as he watched alongside him.
The puppets typically carried long saws and scythes for their work in the fields.
Subaru had told them that the puppets weren’t dangerous to approach, but the sight of them silently working with bladed tools in their hands inevitably filled Touya and the others with an indescribable unease.
And now, those puppets were carrying and tossing bundles of rock.
If those rocks were thrown at Touya and the others—
Or if the puppets came at them all at once with their blades—
…And if the one who did that wasn’t a puppet, but Touya himself while under mind control… When that thought suddenly hit him, Touya was struck by a chill that wasn’t just from the cold rain.
Touya was brought out of his immersed thoughts by a sharp voice.

“Hey, Hatsuyuki!”
Hatsuyuki suddenly ran forward.
Subaru immediately shouted the code phrase to halt the puppets.
However, she couldn’t stop the soccer ball-sized rock one of the puppets had just thrown.
“—!”
On top of the unsteady ground filled with mud and pebbles that had just recently been cleansed of weeds, Ameno took action before anyone else.
She swiftly jumped in front of the wolf cub and bent over him as she slid across the ground, acting as a wall to protect him.
The rock bumped against Ameno’s stooped back with a sharp clang and ricocheted off to land on the ground a few feet away.
Hatsuyuki, unable to understand what was happening, let out a bark of surprise.
As the other club members gathered around Ameno, concerned about possible injuries—
“Are you okay? Are you hurt?” Ameno spoke to Hatsuyuki as if facing a human being.
However, Hatsuyuki just noisily barked at Ameno and wagged his tail threateningly before running off in the rain.
“Thank goodness…”
As Ameno patted her chest in relief at Hatsuyuki’s lack of injuries, several club members called out to her in worry.
However, Ameno herself was completely nonchalant about it.
“Yes. I’m… fine… I think? My skin coating might have gotten a bit torn and peeled, though. I’ll check it over later.”
Ameno moved around her body to confirm it was in working order.
“You would have gotten a bone fracture or worse from that if you were a human.”
“I’m fine. My body’s hardness increases on Nutella—”
Ameno’s explanation was interrupted by a hysteric voice.
“Ugeh, how could you, Ameno-chan?”
The idiotic voice came from Saho.
“What’s wrong, Saho? Ah, were you hit by the mud splattered by the rock?”
Saho’s front body was covered in mud. His rain jacket would wash off quickly in the rain, but his face, which he had just wiped down a few minutes ago, was in a miserable state.
“Sorry, Akiho-san. My calculations didn’t go as far as to include you.”
Ameno bowed her head apologetically.
“Got that right. Well, as long as that cub is safe, I suppose I can deem it an acceptable cost,” said Saho.
“Why are you wearing a self-satisfied look when you didn’t even do anything?” retorted Hayase.
Subaru apologized for Hatsuyuki and her own ineptness in looking after him.

And, surprisingly enough, she apologized to Ameno too.
“Are thou truly unhurt, Ameno?”
“…Y-Yes. Sorry for worrying you.” Then, Ameno seemed to realize something. “Ah, I have to report this to Chiayu-san and tell her that I can serve as an effective countermeasure against falling rocks as well. Is it because I was built sturdy enough to withstand great falls?”
“—Ameno-san.”
However, in contrast to Ameno’s light-hearted attitude, Misasagi wore a long face as she called out her name.
Ameno looked up at the club president with a curious expression.
“What’s wrong, president?”
“…Ameno-san. I won’t criticize you for taking action right away. But your choice of action was mistaken. You mustn’t sacrifice yourself like that.”
“……President, umm…”
Ameno tried to speak, but she swallowed whatever words she was going to say at the sight of Misasagi’s serious gaze.
From the sidelines, Touya could also tell that Misasagi wasn’t acting like her usual self.
“Please correct your evaluation values when calculating your own worth from now on. Understood, Ameno-san?”
“Yes… understood. I’m sorry.” Ameno bowed her head apologetically.
“—Mayo.”
Subaru called out the president’s name in a tone that was both questioning and rebuking.
But even in the face of that, Misasagi merely bowed her head and apologized for the disturbance, refusing to open up her heart on the matter.
“All right, let’s take a short break, shall we?” interceded Kamikoma as she slapped the shoulder of the mud-drenched Saho.
The male club members, due to being so filthy from work, didn’t go to the guest hall and instead headed directly for the open-air bath.
Homura, who had a massive pile of laundry pushed onto her, spoke up in protest. “Isn’t this gender discrimination?” Next to her, Kanae retorted, “Then would you be fine with letting the boys wash your clothes and underwear?” before pushing Homura to get to work. The same scene had been repeated every day for a while now.
The morning of the next day.
Kamikoma and Misasagi had been called to Subaru’s private room in the center of the castle.
“It took some time, but here is the map I promised ye.”
It was a beautifully drawn map.
It was splendidly drawn following the notations and style of modern maps with near perfect accuracy.
Subaru’s castle was located a little to the south of the map’s center, while the northern section of the map surface displayed the unknown territory that Kamikoma and the others wished to explore.

The geographic area and range shown on the Exploration Club map that Kamikoma had supplied to her was perfectly reflected on this map.
"…D-Did you make this yourself, Subaru-hime?" asked Kamikoma after reflexively staring at the map in silence for almost a minute.
"Indeed. This was the first time in a long while that I have taken up a brush with such zeal, so I am a bit tired."
Subaru nonchalantly responded to Kamikoma's amazed voice while rubbing one shoulder.
"It's as detailed and elaborate as a print-out."
The map had been smoothly drawn using a fine brush, ruling pen and quill pen on top of traditional Japanese parchment, exuding polished refinement worthy of a work of art.
"A 'print-out'? Well, I can do this much even without using any spells. I emulated the notations and design from the map ye showed me. Kneading *dyed* patterns into fabrics is far more taxing than cartography of this level."
Subaru spread out the map in front of Kamikoma and Misasagi.
"I reproduced the terrain of this area to the extent of my knowledge on it."
"You mean you didn't draw it based on other books, but rather relied only on your memory?" asked Kamikoma.
"Indeed. However, unfortunately, this is an old map. Some mountains may have crumbled away, and some rivers may have dried up. As I told ye before, the old roads have been overtaken by the forests. If this map will still be of help even with that in mind, then please go ahead and take it."
"Thank you very much."
Kamikoma respectfully accepted the map.
"You mentioned an 'Atlas' before. I have heard that term in the past. However, I have no great collection of maps like ye are hoping for. The books in my library are merely part of my private collection. And even the ones I have are limited in number—the People of Sagacity who lived here took all books with them when they left. And the books they did not bring with them…"
Subaru's words trailed off, but Misasagi and Kamikoma could guess the rest of her sentence.
They burned and disposed of all the books they didn't need when they left. This explained the reason why, despite investigators finding many Nutellan ruins across the world, no books or documents that described their culture had been found.
"Going so far as to erase all traces of their lives here… Just where did the People of Sagacity go?" Misasagi meekly asked, knowing full well how impertinent her question was.
That was a question that touched upon a taboo within Subaru's heart. Subaru glared at her harshly.
However, Misasagi and Kamikoma's eyes merely displayed pure curiosity at the subject.
Eventually, Subaru spoke gravely, as if to convince herself of her words.

“I have yet… to determine whether I should tell that to ye.”
“…….”
“It is not just out of a sense of duty towards my ancestors. If I reveal the truth to ye, it may push ye into even deeper danger. No, it definitely will.”
Subaru’s worry and anguish were grave. Though Misasagi had resolved herself to ask the question as an investigator, seeing Subaru worry and fret like this filled the young girl with bitter feelings of guilt.
“—Please inform Yoshihiro-dono and Fujimori Chiayu-dono that I remain silent because of such circumstances. I swear that it is not because ye all were incompetent or anything of the sort. So could ye please be patient and wait until I have come to a decision?”
Misasagi respectfully bowed her head and offered thanks.
“No… I didn’t think that this matter would worry you so much. I fully understand your words and intentions, Subaru-hime.”
Accepting Misasagi’s thanks while still showing visible conflict on her brow, Subaru spoke up once more.
“There is some information I have to impart to ye along with the map—”
Discerning from her demeanor that this wasn’t a pleasant piece of news, Misasagi and Kamikoma devoted even more of their concentration to Subaru’s words.
“I am not the only one who still lives on this vast planet. There are those who travel the land, never remaining in one place for long.”
“…As I thought… there are others,” murmured Kamikoma.
“……”
Subaru’s confession filled Misasagi with unpleasant feelings.
The first encounter with Subaru had been sensationally reported by the media on Earth. However, certain veteran investigators had instinctively sensed that the issue was just a matter of time.
It was just as Inari had said half-jokingly to Touya and Homura.
And most likely, just as many Exploration Club members had silently thought this during the SA presentation.
“When Hinooka-san and Touya-kun first encountered you, Subaru-hime—you called them bandits and grave robbers, apparently. Suzuran called them thieves as well.”
“…If ye have already heard that much, then that makes things faster. Yes, that is right. They hold no respect or reverence for the People of Sagacity. Not only that, they *hunt* those who appear on this planet from the Tengu-Kakushi befalling them.”
“……Hunt? They hunt people?”
Kamikoma’s eyes widened at that dreadful statement.
“Those who come here through the Tengu-Kakushi are considered treasure troves. My father once fell into their hands as well, but he managed to escape from them.”
“Yoshizumi-dono did…?”
Subaru nodded.

Misasagi's mind quickly process that information and its implications. If these grave robbers had been running rampant across Nutella since that far in the past, the People of Sagacity's power and sphere of influence must have already greatly declined by the time Subaru was in her infancy.
"Ye said that it has been sixty years here since Nutellan investigators from Earth have been visiting this land, correct? That would be ten years ago on Earth. Ascribing the fact that ye haven't encountered those grave robbers in that time as simple luck… isn't possible."
Kamikoma crossed her arms as she thought in silence.
She was of the same opinion as Subaru. She didn't think that they had avoided contact with these so-called grave robbers during their sporadic visits to Nutellan out of sheer luck. Rather, it was more natural to think that these grave robbers were purposefully avoiding them.
"Unlike those who come here through the Tengu Kakushi, ye all move in groups. Even if those grave robbers happened to come across ye by chance, they wouldn't recklessly lay their hands on ye."
Subaru rolled up the map and handed it to Kamikoma.
"I shall leave it to thine judgement whether or not to inform your comrades of this. Remaining vigilant would require you to carry weapons. That might spark unnecessary conflict among ye."
Now the two club presidents understood why Subaru had called just the two of them to her room. This wasn't an issue restricted to just Japanese investigators. Currently, investigators were only permitted to carry weapons for the sake of self-defence and animal hunting on Nutella, but if they came to carry more powerful weapons on them, it would go violate the "forbidden military use" article in the Sriharikota Treaty which established that only peaceful ventures were permitted on Nutella.
"However…" Subaru spoke up once more. "Ye will all eventually head off to far-off lands that even I know nothing of. So… please listen and take this much to heart—ye have already had plenty chance to see the puppets of my castle, correct?"
Misasagi and Kamikoma nodded.
"If ye ever encounter any bronze puppets, run away without question. Understood?"
All of Subaru's puppets were made of wood.
"Only death awaits in lands where those who pull the strings of bronze puppets lie."
Now then, at around the same time that the club presidents were meeting with Subaru.
While the other members were taking a short rest after breakfast, Homura was called out to meet with Nanakubo.
"It's just as you predicted, Nana-senpai! The sky's all cleared up now."
There was a break in the rainy weather and the sky had cleared up, but at the same time, it had quickly gotten cold.

Homura pulled her rain jacket close to herself, wearing it in place of regular cold-weather gear.
“Quit it with calling me ‘Nana’ already. I know you’re doing it on purpose…”
Nanakubo seemed to be in a peevish mood. Apparently, she had really wanted to attend the meeting with the two club presidents.
She was currently sitting slovenly on a chair in a rest area located amidst the orchards outside the castle.
Possibly in an attempt to cheer up Nanakubo or perhaps simply due to her airheaded nature, Homura chatted cheerfully.
“Oh, a rainbow! It’s a rainbow, senpai! So pretty~”
“Now you’re making a fuss over a rainbow? They’re not that rare to see, you know.”
Despite her grumbling, Nanakubo looked up at the rainbow rising across the surface of the morning mist, before letting out a sigh.
“Damn, I forget my camera at the castle,” said Homura. “And just when it’s the perfect time to use the Turret Filter that Ecchuu Takaoka High made. Should I hop inside and get it?”
“Give it up. That’s just a waste of precious film. There’s no point in taking pictures of rainbows or the fall leaves. Do you know just how much film used on Nutella costs?”
“But if I took a picture of the Bagel and the rainbow together, it’d be a super-interesting photo like the Double Bridge at the Imperial Palace[1]. There’s a primary rainbow and secondary rainbow, right? And with the Bagel, that would make a triple bridge… Wait, huh? Could it be impossible angle-wise?”
“…If you wanna take that kind of picture, you’d have to go to a continent at a lower latitude. Even then, a photo of a rainbow and the Bagel laying perfectly side by side like you’re probably thinking of would be impossible.”
“Oh, you sure know a lot. So, what did you call me out here for? Are you going to work me hard with some job again…?”
It was at that point that another first-year member came to join them. It was Touya.
“Huh, Hinooka? You came too?”
It was clear that Touya had also been summoned here by Nanakubo.
He seemed to be in a good mood over the clear weather, and he was wearing far lighter clothing compared to the shivering Homura.
“Woah, really, Touya-kun? You just nonchalantly come whenever a senpai calls for you? How indecent.”
“Hey senpai, what’s your opinion of this girl’s head? Personally, I think some questionable ero-app has been installed in her brain.”
“Don’t get me involved. Geez, what’s with you two?” said Nanakubo in exasperation. She motioned Touya over irritably and then moved onto the main subject. “…Well, the truth is, I only have business with Hinooka, but due to certain circumstances, I called you as well, Touya.”
“I don’t like the idea of making cliques and factions, though.”

Touya's guard was clearly still up towards Nanakubo.
"That's not what this is. Besides, I'm talking to you guys on Oozore-san's behalf."
"The Wizard's!?"
Homura straightened her back upon hearing that name. Originally, vice-president Oozore should have been the one to come on this mission instead of Nanakubo.
"If you have some business with the first years, why didn't you call Kanae and Saho here too?" asked Touya.
"You really know how to hit where it hurts. Saho looks like he has loose lips, so he's no good. As for Kanae… well, her circumstances are a bit…"
"But she's more tight-lipped than Hinooka, isn't she?" said Touya.
"Guh." Homura pitched forward while holding her chest, feeling the damage from that indirect insult.
Nanakubo picked up some dried leaves from the ground and scattered them on the thick tabletop in front of her. The slightly wet table was now decorated with vivid colors.
"I'm going to teach you a new spell. Learn it during this mission before we return home."
"A new spell…?"
Hearing that finally made Homura interested in listening.
"Yeah. It still hasn't been entered in the Exploration Club's library. It's a brand-new spell—Do you remember Suou-san?"
The two first-years sat down while Nanakubo stood up as she spoke.
"Yes. She's the female club president of the Nagato Fisheries School, right?" said Touya.
"The one who used that orca whale called Bobby-kun! She uses a school of orcas, right?"
Nanakubo nodded.
"This has to do with that school of orcas. Those orcas migrate through Nutella's ocean. It's estimated that they travel a total distance of seventy-five thousand kilometers in a year."
"T-That much…!? Isn't that twice the circumference of Earth?"
"But wouldn't that mean that they spend practically the entire year moving? Even if you excluded the time to take to hunt and their breeding seasons, they wouldn't have the time to even sleep in that case."
"No, it's still insufficient. Even with all those things excluded, it's still a distance that's absolutely impossible to cross in a year. The physique of Nutellan orcas isn't that different from the Earth species. Their highest speed is eighty kilometers per hour. However, by our calculations, the speed necessary to migrate over that distance is two hundred kilometers per hour."
"Eeh, two hundred kilometers per hour!? Isn't that as fast as a bullet train?" said Homura.

“Earth tuna can apparently swim up to a hundred and sixty kilometers per hour, but even that is only in momentary bursts. Normally, they only swim at ninety kilometers per hours or less—however, Bobby and the other Nutellan orcas can cruise at two hundred kilometers per hour for several days in a row.”
After glancing at the two first years, especially Homura, to make sure they were following along, Nanakubo continued explaining.
“S-So then?” asked Homura.
“—This speed is impossible for any living being. Therefore, people theorized that the*migration* of the orcas aren’t annual, but rather biannual. Well, this theory was also debunked as impossible in the end.”
“So the truth of the matter is different?” asked Homura.
Nanakubo nodded.
“That’s right. Bobby’s school of orcas used magic. It’s a liquid-type spell, which decreases water resistance and crates propulsion by moving the ocean water itself. And on the scale of *the entire orca school*, at that.”
“Wow… so it’s a restrictive-use Icosahedron spell that controls liquids…”
“That’s super-conductive propulsion,” exclaimed Touya with wide eyes.
“What’s that?” asked Homura.
“No, never mind,” said Touya.
Nanakubo sighed.
“If a living human were on top of something as fast as a bullet train while it crossed the sea, they would normally die. Suou-san really did something outrageous… But well, thanks to that, we figured out how the orcas migrate.”
As Nanakubo praised Suou half in exasperation, Homura leaned forward over the table.
“Then the new spell you spoke of is that magic which decreases water resistances and lets you swim fast?”
“Right, right. I’m here to turn you into a master swimmer… is that what you thought I’d say? Why should I have to come all the way here just to teach you that kind of spell? It’s useless on land.”
“Eh?”
Touya spoke up next. “Then, is it a weather forecast spell?”
“Oh!”
Nanakubo clasped her hands and put on a flirtatious act.
“Nice, Touya-kun. You did well to realize that. I’m so impressed!”
“Ugh, gross,” said Touya, drawing away from Nanakubo.
“What!? Well, regardless, that’s wrong too. Weather forecasting is a unique ability of mine, and it’s not something that you two can copy. Sorry, here’s your consolation prize.” Nanakubo tapped the table.
“What, that’s not it either?”
“Unfortunately not,” said Nanakubo curtly. “All right, I’m going to talk seriously now. Listen well—First, there are very few animals that can use magic. It takes great cost for animals, who are always struggling just to

survive, to acquire magic, which even humans have trouble learning. That goes for passing it on to their children too."
The costs involved consisted of unique characteristics that became apparent when an animal tried to learn magic, like, for example, the calorie intake needed to maintain their large physique, the danger of taking the initiative to fight enemies, or their naturally short lifespans.
"However, it's a different story for animals that live in herds. They just need to have one of their members take on the cost of acquiring magic. Yukiwarimaru is probably an example of that."
"What about Bobby-kun?" asked Homura.
"That's just it. Bobby is the leader of his orca school. As such, he can use magic. But accelerating his entire school to two hundred kilometers per hour is just plain impossible. The Wizard Oozore-san can walk on top of water, but even he can't apply that spell to other people. And Bobby's school keeps migrating for several days at a time at those speeds."
"In that case… Is it a long-lasting spell…?"
Nanakubo's expression turned impressed at Homura's idea.
"I'm surprised you figured that out. Hanayashiki, the club president at Hyougo Nadahama High, also thought of that and went to investigate the secret of the orcas' magic with president Suou… But this turned out to be wrong as well. It isn't a long-lasting spell."
Nanakubo made a menacing expression as if she were telling a ghost story.
"Each of the orcas shared the burden of providing the magic power for the spell. In other words, it's a spell that only works when casting the incantation as a group. Bobby is merely the central hub for performing the spell."
Nanakubo arranged the leaves on the table as orca models.
The big leaf at the head of them was Bobby, while the small leaves were the other orcas in his school.
"This isn't like some tv show where they all cast the same spell to perform a 'power-up' or anything simple like that. They each cast different spell patterns which combine together to form a huge spell—so, while casting the spell, the orcas all serve as a single brain. They basically act as a single living organism."
The leaves on the table were arranged in a manner where their edges slightly overlapped each other, forming one giant silhouette. This was a model of how Bobby's orca school looked as they swam through the ocean at tremendous speeds.
"…Calling this 'group magic' doesn't do it justice. Some have been thinking of calling it colony magic, but that doesn't really fit it either… No lifeforms that possess such a survival strategy have been found on Earth, so we don't yet have the right language or concepts to describe it. I guess the best analogy would be groups of migratory birds that use updrafts in the air? Something like that. After discovering this, the migratory birds on Nutella are also worth looking into… Upsy-daisy…"

Nanakubo then reached into her shirt and took out the Transport Ring she'd shown Touya a few days ago.
"Ah… that's… the ring from Iriomote Island…"
Homura was surprised since it was her first time seeing it during this mission.
She looked over at Touya next to her, who nodded to affirm his prior awareness of the ring.
"Sorry for the long preface. It's finally time for the main subject! President Hanayashiki analyzed the magic that president Suou experienced using a brain-wave scanner and made an incantation that applies the spell to the Transport Ring. Using this new spell, we can freely transfer magic power from one Transport Ring to another—do you guys understand the meaning of this?"
Nanakubo suddenly paused after saying all that in one breath, leaving the two first-years time to parse through her explanation.
Eventually, Homura tentatively spoke up.
"…Umm, transferring magic power between Transport Rings… Well, it seems convenient at first glance, but the use of magic is limited to Nutella. I don't think it's all that useful, you know?"
Touya spoke up next.
"But if there are two club presidents who carry their own Transport Rings like on this mission, they can lend each other magic power and increase the number of members that return to Earth at a time, right? Then the Hiyoshizaka High members wouldn't have to go all the way back to their distant base camp to return."
"That's true. But is that really so ground-breaking? It only reduces travel time by a few hours in Earth-time."
"Hinooka, you're really strict with this kind of thing, aren't you…?" said Nanakubo, oddly impressed. However, she then put the Transport Ring on her finger and held it right in front of their noses, as if to give a hint.
"……"
"……Ah!"
Homura and Touya seemed to realize at nearly the same time.
"If we use the surplus magic power of that *lost* Transport Ring—"
"We can freely travel between Nutella and Earth… right?"
Homura and Touya exchanged glances.
Nanakubo nodded vigorously and sat back down on her chair.
Yes, that's right—
The residual magic power within Transport Rings could be an important factor that decided life-and-death in emergencies. And there were rings for investigating exploration activities that breached the international treaty, like what was uncovered in China. Because of that, the residual magic power in every Transport Ring was strictly monitored and managed by UNPIEP headquarters, and sometimes inspectors like Meiville were sent to investigate possible infringements.

The Transport Ring that Nanakubo held, which was also illegal in its own way, had an enormous amount of magic power stored up within it, but since its coordinates were originally set for use on Iriomote Island, it could only allow travel to that isolated and uninhabited Nutellan island.
However—
If that magic power could be freely transferred to another Transport Ring—it was a different story.
“That’s right. With this, we can do it. We can freely travel to Nutella! We can do it in secret from the UNPIEP and the Japanese government. There are plenty of ways to fool the entry records to the Transport Rooms in the club buildings. Even transporting from right outside the club building isn’t much of a problem, as long as we bring the Transport Rings outside. Right now, it’s under strict surveillance, but you guys have also had opportunities to sneak off with one, right? —The real issue is the Transport Ring and its magic power.”
True. Homura herself had accidently brought her club’s Transport Ring outside the club building after that emergency escape from Nutella without realizing it.
Touya tilted his head in deep thought.
“Why is Oozore-san telling us this through you, Nanakubo-senpai…? Why tell us this secret when it hasn’t yet been made public in the club’s library?”
“Ah… that’s…”
Nanakubo rested her chin on her hands with a slightly lonely look.
“…I wonder why. I don’t know either. Geez, I wish he would have told me.”
Homura worriedly asked a question next, making a troubled face while holding two leaves against her eyebrows in a weird pose.
“I-It couldn’t be… part of a plot to take over Japan, right?”
“Of course not. No matter how full of ourselves we may act on Nutella, we’re still just high-schoolers in the end. What could we possible do on Earth? If Inari heard you say that kind of nonsense, she’d punch you, you know?”
Homura could only laugh weakly in the face of Nanakubo’s menacing look.
Nanakubo then showed a melancholic expression that she normally never displayed and murmured as if trying to convince herself of her words.
“What I want to change is the Exploration Club… I’ll definitely change it.”
Those unconsciously murmured words made Homura and Touya’s feelings take a downturn as well.
Still, the exact nature of each of their feelings differed. Homura felt as if Nanakubo had become someone more familiar and understandable to her.
……Nana-senpai… Like I thought, she’s lonely…
It showed how their senpai lay at a place the two of them had yet to reach, despite only being a year older than them. But at the same time, Nanakubo’s expression was that of an ordinary young girl who was struggling to do her best beneath the shadow of the club presidents, whose existences were so huge within the Exploration Club.

However, perhaps she had unexpectedly liked Homura's earlier joke, as she then lifted her head back up with a grin.
"Taking over Japan aside, I do approve of the idea of spreading this spell to every school's Exploration Club as common knowledge. It will serve as a strong guarantee for us investigators."
"Guarantee? Ah, you mean insurance. I can help get it for you cheap, you know~"
"What, you mean your father's an insurance man? That occupation is the exact opposite of investigators. I'm surprised your father let you join."
Homura just smiled, holding back from explaining all the complicated details of her joining the club.
Putting aside her disbelief, Nanakubo continued her explanation.
"Well, this is basically a trump card. In emergencies when we need to send teams to rescue people stranded on Nutella, we can borrow magic power from other rings if the Transport Ring for the designated coordinates has insufficient power. Well, the secret would definitely be revealed if we did that, though."
Nanakubo slapped her knee and stood up.
"In any case, the premise is that there needs to be at least one person who can use this new spell at each school, otherwise there's no point in forming a network like this. I intend to tell the same thing to Koma-san—Now then, let's begin the fun study time. Shall we start from the basic principles for Homura to make up for her rickety foundations?"
"Ugh." Homura visibly drew away.
"—Have you ever wondered why the Transport Rings can refill their magic power on Earth?"
That evening.
While absentmindedly staring at the red-dyed ring amidst the thick clouds in the sunset sky, Subaru soaked her feet in the open-air bath alone.
The bath water comfortably massaged her cold feet amidst the silent evening air.
"Both the day and fall are coming to an end… We are already at the threshold of winter."
Though bathing by herself like this was a common occurrence in her everyday life, she felt a certain sense of satisfaction in it.
At the same time, she was thinking over the menu for tonight's dinner, wishing to prepare a special handmade dish for those young Earthlings who would be departing the castle tomorrow.
In the midst of her contemplation…
"—Subaru-san? Are you in there?"
A shy voice came from the changing room.
"Homura? —Thou may come in if thou wish."
"No, I'll stay here… Umm…"
"What is it?"

Homura had entered the changing room wearing a shirt with scrunched-sleeves, having been in the midst of tonight's cooking preparations before coming here, but she felt diffident towards Subaru and didn't enter the bathroom itself.
She spoke through the screen door separating the changing room and bathroom.
"Umm, Subaru-san, has anything strange happened to you?"
"Hmm, something strange… I did see some night herons fly off to do some evening fishing."
The phrasing of Subaru's comment was too difficult for Homura to fully understand, but the implication that nothing odd had happened recently got through properly.
"Hah… Is that so? No, I apologize for bothering you during your bath."
"Hmm."
Subaru nodded at the girl's polite apology.
Homura left the bathroom while seeming to mumble something to herself.
Following her departure, the sound of Kamikoma's harsh voice giving her direction came from down the hallway.
"…Phew."
After soaking for a while longer, Subaru rose from the bath and sat down on the edge of the tub, putting on a thin bathrobe over her wet and heated body.
She then looked up at eaves of the castle roof above her head and quietly called out.
"—Enough, Yukiwarimaru."
Without making a sound, a huge creature nimbly scaled down the castle wall and landed on the stone ledge of the bathroom that looked over the valley below.
It was Yukiwarimaru, illuminated by the red light of the sunset.
Caught in her fangs was the scruff of one boy, hanging pitifully from the wolf's mouth.
If Yukiwarimaru loosened her jaws even slightly, he would be sent tumbling down to the ground far below.
"Now then—Was Yukiwarimaru rearing such a cub?"
The boy wore a bitter face at Subaru's attempt at feigned ignorance.
It was Saho Akiho. He was in quite a bit of pain with his neck strangled by his shirt and unable to move an inch.
"Ah… Hello there," he replied weakly.
Though she was wearing a bathrobe, Subaru was practically naked in the thin fabric that perfectly showed her body lines. The way her long hair was tied up behind her head to prevent it from getting wet only enhanced the indecency of her appearance.
"Ah, you're not going to scream out in embarrassment, princess?"
"Well, if I made a ruckus, those anxious girls might run back here."

“Eh, wouldn’t that be really inconvenient for me? This is bad. Someone might just end up MIA from our group during this mission.”
Despite his predicament, Saho’s tone was ridiculously calm.
He was currently dressed in a light shirt and a pair of rolled-up trousers while bare-footed. His appearance clearly demonstrated his intent to climb the nearly vertical outside wall of the castle.
While swaying in the wind beneath Yukiwarimaru’s jaws, he blatantly stared at Subaru, fully taking advantage of his situation.
Having herself stared at so openly, Subaru nonchalantly covered her chest with her arms and turned her body away.
Her cheeks might have been slightly red from more than just the heat of the bath. But it was impossible to tell for sure in the evening light.
She nodded as if impressed.
“Hmm. This might be a good opportunity.”
“Yeah, I thought the same thing. Now’s the last chance to talk while there’s still daylight. It will be impossible after tomorrow, right?”
Subaru smiled at the way Saho’s mouth never seemed to stop talking.
“True—I heard there was someone who called me an old woman well past her prime. Would that happen to be thee? Mr. Peeping Yonosuke[2].”
Subaru’s tone was jesting, like when she acted out Rakugo.
Despite himself, Saho Akiho felt a bewitching charm in Subaru’s pleasant smile and was struck by several urges at once.
Put plainly, he was a bit miffed, but the situation being what it was, all he could do was endure the suffocation his neck was being subjected to and croak out some words.
“Eh? No, I’m not Yonosuke, I’m Saho. Saho Akiho.”
Subaru chuckled at the way he desperately pushed himself to retort.
“…Hmm. It is true what they say about people being wolves to other people. But it’s also said that a wolf should be allowed to give an excuse for his actions. What business do thou have with this old woman—Saho-dono?”
Subaru gave a small wave of her hand.
With that, Yukiwarimaru finally moved and dropped Saho into the bathroom.
Under the stare of Yukiwarimaru’s reddish-brown eyes, Saho resignedly sat cross-legged atop the stone ledge.
“I’ve heard animal proverbs like that before. There’s also the saying ‘a cliff to your front and a wolf to your back’, right? Well, whatever, let’s get down to business. Princess, you didn’t say anything when you saw my *cat-person* form, or when you saw the color of Yuri-chan’s skin either. You only treated Ameno-chan, who should look like a normal human, as a puppet.”
“Thou speak of the first day ye arrived here. What of it?”
“Yeah, you see, I was able to figure it out from that. The people who lived on this planet were limited to just standard humans. Well, I suppose I can’t really say what’s ‘standard’, though.”
“That is not reason enough for thee to sneak into this bath.”

“No, it is—uwah!”
Saho got down from the ledge and tried to step forward, but Yukiwarimaru’s jaws latched onto his trousers and pulled him back immediately.
“Ouch… Anyway, we have no definite proof yet that you yourself aren’t a Trans with the special characteristics from animals and spirits.”
“…I see. So thou came to confirm the truth of the matter. And thou insist that you are not some fool who came here with lecherous intent towards me?”
“As if I’d ever do that,” said Saho with a shake of his head.
“Hoh…? Would it not be sufficient to ask the other girls to confirm for thee?”
“Girls are the least trustworthy when it comes to reporting on their fellow girls. Who knows whether they’d truthfully answer if I asked? Besides, there are types of Trans who change at night—”
Subaru interrupted Saho’s attempt at defending his actions.
“Very well, I do not mind if thou do so.”
“Eh?” Saho gaped at Subaru’s words.
“I said I do not mind. Besides, I have yet to properly thank thee for before. Remember, thou risked thyself to block the mud from hitting me.”
—She was referring to the accident where Ameno protected Hatsuyuki from a rock dropped by a puppet. The deflected rock sent mud flying high through the air, but Saho stubbornly bore the brunt of it. Subaru had apparently carefully seen his actions then.
“Ah… Back then, I saw the rock heading towards you and thought it’d be real bad if it hit, so my body just acted on the spur of the moment. In the end, I got covered in mud. Well, I was more worried about Hatsuyuki, but Ameno-chan was faster than me, so—”
“Indeed, I hear that thou have often played with my wolves, Saho-dono.”
“Well yeah. Though the prez keeps yelling at me not to skip work.”
“Fufu… The wolves no longer have anyone to play with them now that Suzuran is gone. They were surely happy to spend time with thee…”
“Huh, that true? In that case… Ah……”
Saho spoke to Yukiwarimaru for a moment, but when he turned back around, his breath caught in his throat.
That was because Subaru had stood up and calmly removed her bathrobe with her back to him.
“Is this sufficient?”
The witch princess stood with her naked body illuminated under the setting sun.
Her fine golden hair was now undone and gently clung to her back all the way down to her waist.
“……”
Subaru had unexpectedly granted his request.

Saho’s frivolous chatting finally came to a halt as his eyes were fixed upon her completely bare body.
The two of them turned silent, as the soft shifting of the decorative plants placed on the lookout and the ivy creeping along the castle walls filled the air along with the roaring sound of the waterfall outside.
The evening wind caressed their skin. Saho belatedly realized that she had exposed herself to such cold.
Even so, his mouth still refused to function.
“Saho-dono.”
After a while, Subaru suddenly spoke up.
She turned to look at Saho over her shoulder.
“…Thou likely find it vexing to gaze at such an ordinary aged body, but no tail will sprout from me no matter how long thou wait.”
Saho finally came to his sense.
“Ah…… Err…… Could you spin around so I can get a better look?”
“I shall kill you—turn away now.”
Even then, Saho was too dumbfounded to break his gaze away, so Yukiwarimaru lifted up her nose to block his view.
“H-Hey, you’re in the way!”
After putting back on her bathrobe, Subaru spoke with her unwavering calmness.
“Truly, it is a shame; ye male members of the Exploration Club would look quite adult and handsome if ye just made thy hair into topknots. I won’t tell thee to shave thy head, but thee seem like a child regardless of how big thy body is.”
“Hah, a topknot? As if I’d ever let myself have one of those,” responded Saho with an insolent attitude.
“I have become a bit cold. Perhaps I shall head to the kitchen after taking another brief soak.”
Subaru reacted to Saho’s attitude with a faint witch-like smile and then gave directions to Yukiwarimaru with a light jerk of her chin.
“Now then, thou may toss him into the basin at the bottom of the waterfall, Yukiwari.”
“Eh, no way, uwaaaaah!”
Just as Saho had been about to head to the bathroom entrance to leave with a discontent expression, Yukiwarimaru picked him up by the scruff of his neck once again and tossed him over the ledge with such speed and force he looked like falling plane.
“Uwah, this place really is cold.”
“—Homura-san?”
Homura had just entered the stables after descending the stone staircase down to it with her body stooped over.
She wore a jacket over her pajamas and held a handmade pillow in one arm.

Ameno looked up at this sudden night visitor just as she finished tidying up her Exploration Club equipment and sorting her remaining luggage in the stables.
“Hey, can I sleep here you with tonight, Ame-chan?”
Homura’s breath shone white under the lamp light as she spoke.
“Here? You can’t, Homura-san. You’ll catch a cold.”
“It’s fine, it’s fine.”
Homura proudly patted her stomach.
“My stomach is all full and warm from the stewed pot of pheasants you and the prez caught in the mountains.”
“But…”
“Everyone stuffed themselves tonight. Here, catch.”
Homura forcefully pushed her pillow onto Ameno.
“Ah, got it—Subaru-hime-san was staring at the remaining rice bins in storage and wondering with a serious face whether she’d last through the winter, though…” said Ameno worriedly.
“That’s the entrance to the stables, right? Can I go take a peek?”
“Ah, that’s a storehouse there. The entrance is in the opposite direction. It’s dark, so watch your step.”
The stables stood annexed to the lowest floor of the castle with an entrance leading outside.
The stables were made out of natural bedrock. At the back of the stables was a warehouse that was half-underground.
With the wooden entrance door closed, virtually no wind blew inside, but the penetrating cold from the frigid air that creeped in chilled the soles of Homura’s feet.
Homura opened the door slightly and stepped outside to look up at the starry night sky.
“I thought it was still the middle of fall when we came here, but now it’s already winter on Nutella.”
“Yeah.”
“I keep thinking of how the longer I stay here, the more aged I’ll be when I get back…”
“Ahaha, that’s true. But Akado-san’s grandmother said that growing old isn’t all bad.”
“That so? Hmm… I’ll withhold any opinions on that for the time being.”
In front of the stables was a small plaza and beyond that was a grove of trees. It wasn’t possible to see the area surrounding the castle from here. Even so, the overlapping echoes of the nearby waterfalls came from all four cardinal directions of the valley. They sounded distant during the day, but the roaring of the rushing water was quite distinct at night.
The same went for the night sky above. Breathtaking stars glittered in the heavens, incomparable to the muted sky of Earth’s cities.
As she gazed at the stars, Homura let out a white breath within her palms.

“…It’s a spectacular view no matter how many times I see it… Speaking of which, are there constellations in the sky on Nutella?”
Ameno came out to sit and gaze up at the sky alongside Homura.
“Yeah, there are, from what I’ve heard. But people from various countries have been petitioning to name them, so no constellation names have been officially decided, yet. I don’t know all the constellations either. There’s no network connection here, after all…”
“I see, so people compete even over constellations.”
“More importantly, Homura-san. Wouldn’t Subaru-hime-san know the constellation names and legends passed down by the People of Sagacity who lived on this planet?”
“Ah, yeah, she probably has star charts and the like. There are probably lots of tales regarding the Bagel too.”
Homura crossed her arms and nodded. She wondered what kind of names Himekawa-san and the rabbit-boy Kuwazono-kun from Tomakomai Denpa High gave to the stars they observed with their club’s telescope.
“Speaking of star charts…”
Just as Homura was about to broach another topic, an exasperated voice came from behind her.
“—What are you doing?”
Kanae peeked her head out from the stables’ half-opened door.
She came outside to join Homura and Ameno. Unlike Homura, she was still wearing her exploration outfit.
“Ah, Yuri-san. Good evening,” greeted Ameno.
“Even Ameno’s out here,” said Kanae in surprise.
“Fufu. I thought you’d come!”
Homura’s self-satisfied look made Kanae frown sullenly.
“I’m looking at the stars with Homura-san,” explained Ameno.
“I see.”
Despite her seeming lack of interest, Kanae moved to stand next to Ameno and quietly looked up at the starry sky.
……
Homura peeked at Kanae’s face from the side. Her dark red eyes reflected the stars above.
“Do you know, Yuri-chan? During the SA, there was a presentation on something called the Geocentric Model hypothesis, I think? Does that have something to do with the constellations here?”
Kanae replied without hiding the irritation she felt upon hearing that term.
“…The Geocentric Model hypothesis is a superstition that some Christian-centric countries in Europe and South America support as a theory on Nutellan space.”
“Superstition?”
“It’s not yet certain that it’s mere superstition…” said Ameno, but Kanae glared at her.
“Even you, Ameno? The whole idea is ridiculous.”

“So what is it, exactly? Didn’t they mention an Aris-something-or-other System along with it?”
“It’s an irrelevant theory. A superstitious belief like old legends about zodiac signs. That’s all it amounts to.”
“Eh… come on, explain it, Yuri-chan-san-sensei.”
“Don’t call me that.”
Seeing that Kanae had no intention of explaining, Ameno took over instead.
“The most powerful supporter of the Geocentric Model hypothesis is the Vatican in Rome. And because the head of their faith agrees with the hypothesis, many Catholics perceive Nutella that way as well, apparently.”
“Heh~. Yeah, I know of the Vatican. It’s famous as the smallest country in the world. But how exactly do they perceive Nutella?”
“The Aristarchusic system is a branched-off theory of the Geocentric model, which claims that the universe revolves around the sun at its center. Famous people like the astronomer Copernicus and the philosopher Plato apparently believed in that model as well. The Greek astronomer Aristarchus was also one such believer in this model, and so the model came to be called by his name.”
“So that’s it. The name sounded like some brand name, so I thought it had something to do with fashion.”
Perhaps unable to let Homura’s misplaced admiration slide, Kanae finally spoke up again.
“…It isn’t correct to call it a Geocentric model. In the Aristarchusic system, the Earth moves, so it should be called a Heliocentric model. The universe revolves around them in either model, so… the term ‘Geocentric Model hypothesis’ was a name given to this *superstition* in sarcasm by those who dispute it. It’s similar to how Schrödinger’s Cat was named.”
“I see, I see… Err, so?”
Homura still didn’t see to get it. Kanae gripped Homura’s shoulders and pulled her face close, glaring at her sharply.
“Do you still not understand? The Vatican is saying that Nutella is a planet *bestowed upon us by God*. They’re proclaiming that this is the Garden of Eden that Adam and Eve were thrown out of as depicted in the Old Testament.”
“…The Garden of Eden!? Really!?” said Homura in surprise.
“If Nutella is the Garden of Eden, does that make Earth a planet of purgatory? It’s completely ridiculous. It’s not even funny as a joke.”
“But it’s true that we’ve yet to find any dinosaur fossils on Nutella…” argued Ameno. “And if you look at the age measurements… there are certified traces of a huge flood having happened in the far past…”
“Not you too, Ameno… Really now.”
Seeing Kanae pout, Ameno cheerfully shrugged and back off.
“If that were true, wouldn’t it be better for us to return to Earth? Wouldn’t God be angry at our presence here?” asked Homura.

“Quit it already. Things are already bad enough with the Catholic fundamentalists getting full of themselves.”
“Sorry, sorry.”
Not really understanding the conversation, Homura apologized in the face of Kanae’s lethal glare. However—
Even if a debunked universal model from the Middle Ages seemed like it might be revived due to the discovery of Nutella, Homura did feel it was strange that the religion and even worldviews of the people who supported it would make a comeback alongside it. Ameno also turned serious and nodded in agreement with Kanae.
“True. In a speech at the New York UN headquarters, Doctor Chandra said that Nutella exists for all people who live on Earth and all the children who will be born in the future. So people should abstain from proclamations that acknowledge only the opinions and claims of people belonging to a specific religion.”
“I see,” said Homura. “Yeah, we investigators have to be especially careful… right?”
“Yes.”
Ameno was impressed by Homura’s words which showed her self-awareness as an investigator, but that was only fleeting.
“But, hey, in the Geocentric Model hypothesis, the universe revolves around the Sun, right? But wouldn’t that require crazy amounts of centrifugal force?”
“Even the Vatican isn’t that stupid. They mean something different when they say that the Sun is at the center.”
“Something different…? Ah… Achoo…”
Homura let out a big sneeze. Seeing that, Ameno urged the other two girls to return inside the stables.
—Just as Homura was wistfully looking back up at the starry sky before turning to leave…
“Ah, wait… Something… is flowing from the sky…”
Homura suddenly stood up and stared at the darkness above.
Kanae followed Homura’s gaze. Kanae calmly held out a hand towards the sky, and the light leaking out from the stables reflected slightly against something in the air.
What alighted upon Kanae’s finger was a glittering fragment of the starry sky—
“……Snow…” Kanae murmured.
Homura brought her face close to look at it with her hands over her mouth and smiled.
“…You’re right. Wow…”
“Snow…!?”
Ameno rushed back from the door and just barely managed to see it in time. Soon after, the little piece of crystallized water melted and vanished atop Kanae’s chilled finger.

Homura and the others returned to the stables.
The three of them slipped into the stray bed there, with Ameno in the middle and Homura and Kanae to either side of her.
“You’re so warm, Ame-chan.”
“Ehehe.”
“Ameno, your body’s thermoregulation is off. Lower your temperature. It’s a waste of power.”
“It’s fine. I’m making sure to leave plenty of battery for our departure tomorrow.”
“L-Let’s huddle a bit closer… I’m on the verge of falling off here,” said Homura.
Kanae had also apparently came to sleep in the stables from the start, as she had brought her sleeping bag to use in place of a bed cover. Even so, Ameno’s small bed was quite a narrow fit with all three of them together. Kanae wore a displeased face over being forced to lie on the side against the wall, but Ameno actually seemed to enjoy the cramped sleeping arrangement.
“Still, that was amazing… Snow… I guess you could call it the *first snow* (Hatsuyuki[3]) of the season.”
“Ah, you’re right. It’s Hatsuyuki-chan.”
More snow had begun to gradually fall after that first snowflake.
It was still too early in the season for a major snowfall. But it made the cold seem even more pronounced, and Homura felt as if she could hear the frost forming outside the door.
“That was probably the first snowflake of the season. The first snowflake to fall on Nutella. Those who see the first snowflake of winter will end up becoming very happy,” Homura declared proudly.
“Is that so?”
“Yes—it’s a very special snowflake. That snowflake landed on you, Yuri-chan. You’ll definitely become happy.”
“……As if.”
Kanae rejected Homura’s words with a scornful laugh, seeming as if she wanted to say, ‘Don’t fill Ameno with your stupid superstitions.’
“…Snow is always falling somewhere all year round,” she began to explain. “Besides, the first snowflake isn’t the only one that’s special. Each and every snowflake crystal has a different shape.”
“Hahaha, that’s quite a joke… Eh, you’re serious?”
“Homura-san, what Yuri-san says is true. The shape of every snowflake is slightly different. It’s impossible to find snowflakes that have exactly the same shape in a single season. The number of crystal patterns ranges into ten thousand of quadrillions. Even when people try to make them artificially, they always end up different for some reason. I can’t look up the latest theories on it online right now, though, so I apologize if I’m mistaken,” said Ameno somewhat unreliably.

“Ah, that’s that word again, ‘patterns’… Heh, in that case, all snowflakes that fall are the first snowflakes of the season?”
“I suppose that’s the best way to think of it,” said Ameno with a giggle beneath the cover of the sleeping bag.
Kanae unpleasantly frowned and turned over to face her back to them on the bed.
“You two really are easygoing…”
After saying that in an exasperated tone, Kanae turned silent.
“By the way, you started calling her ‘Yuri-chan at some point…?” Ameno asked Homura in a whisper—though of course, the person in question could still hear her perfectly well.
Homura nodded.
“It’s because I was jealous of the way you two get along~. I’m guessing Yuri-chan has come here on previous nights, right?” Then Homura lowered her voice to a whisper as well. “Were you guys talking about your little sister Samari-chan?”
“……”
Ameno seemed hesitant to answer, perhaps out of consideration for the silent Kanae.
Homura could have sworn she saw a slightly lonely expression on Ameno’s face then in the dimness of the stables.
Roto Samari—That was the anagram name Kanae had given to her. Kanae usually acted like she didn’t care about names and such, but that was probably a lie. She had surely put some meaning and feeling into that name.
To Homura, her younger sister Tsuyu was annoying, but also someone she couldn’t separate from; a close family member, but also someone who had completely different interests and hobbies. That kind of close yet distant existence. However, how did Ameno feel about her own younger sister? And also, when would Samari be able to participate in missions with the Hiyoshizaka club?
“…Or did you perhaps talk about Hatsuyuki-chan instead? That cub seems to be quite wary and seems to refuse to get close to anyone, but I’m sure we’ll be able to get along with him next time.”
“Yes. It’d really be nice if that happened. And next time we come, Hatsuyuki-chan will be much bigger.”
“Ah… You’re right…”
The wall of time that separated them from Nutella every time they returned to Earth. The ever-increasing distance between Subaru’s heart and her memories. The disappointment of only getting to see Hatsuyuki’s growth in skipped stages.
If God made Nutella, Homura felt like complaining a little about his cruel design of the planet.
A winter mountain, huh… A fox really would be right at home here…
Those were Homura’s last vague thoughts before she fell asleep.

Late at night, Subaru didn’t raise her head from the desk she sat at as a knock came to the door of her private den.
She had already noticed the approaching footsteps earlier.
“Thou may enter—Mayo.”
“…I apologize for disturbing you so late at night.”
Misasagi Mayo entered the den carrying a small lamp. Her undone silver hair had regained its deep color once nighttime arrived.
This was Subaru’s private den at the topmost floor of the castle.
Subaru cast a huge shadow on the wall from the illumination of the lamp set beside her window desk.
A brazier was dimly burning coals in one corner of the room with an iron kettle set atop it.
Even with that, though, the harsh cold permeated the air in the room.
“Please sit down and wait. I shall be finished in a moment. Then I shall pour thee some tea.”
Even as she spoke, Subaru’s hand didn’t rest as she continued to write with a fine brush.
“I apologize for making thee wait. As thou can see, I am writing up the reply letters to thy father and Fujimori-dono.”
“Thank you very much. I apologize for interrupting you.”
“It is fine.”
Mayo quietly sat down as she was told, and Subaru noticed her gaze was directed at particular spot.
“…Is that rare to thee?”
“Yes—”
Mayo nodded as her gaze was fixed on the splendid jade art piece placed next to her chair.
There was also a stringed instrument that resembled a Chinese huqin lute displayed on the wall with a wonderful-scented dry flower.
Mayo had visited this room several times with Kamikoma, but this was her first opportunity to visit the room alone and calmly look it over.
“There are so many interesting objects here… That reminds me. Momoyama-kun mentioned how there are even some items in this castle that would have been difficult for you to obtain on your own, Subaru-san.”
Upon hearing that, Subaru put on a cynical smile.
“Momoyama-dono has made me remember something unpleasant.”
“Something unpleasant…?”
“Or perhaps I should say an unpleasant person….” Subaru sighed. “There is a traveling merchant who sometimes visits this castle at irregular intervals… It vexes me to say this, but there are indeed items here that I had to buy from that person. I just could not seem to get along with that merchant. Moreover, he truly showed his disposition as a traveler. When I tried to politely make him welcome, he would always somehow size me up and make me pay high prices for his wares. He was truly an irritating person.”

This was the first time Mayo had ever heard of merchants who traveled across Nutella.
But Mayo could understand the reason for that. There likely didn't exist a way to properly distinguish such traveling merchants from the dangerous graver robbers that Subaru had spoken of. So, Subaru had likely omitted mentioning it in order to prevent them from making guesses and predictions on insufficient information.
"So that merchant is a man, then?"
"Hoh." Subaru stared pointedly at Mayo. "…Well, that is correct. However, we're both old dodgers at this point. He is long withered at this point. I obtained this ink from him at a high price, too. It annoys me just to remember it."
Subaru grumbled while using her foot to remix the ink with an inkstone.
"Mu, that's right… That man would probably possess a map of this planet… However, who knows how many years or decades it will be till his next visit…"
"…What is his name?"
Subaru shrugged at Mayo's question.
"His name? Who knows. He always uses a different name at different places. What were some of them… I think he has called himself 'Eulenspiegel', 'Falstaff', 'Arlecchino'[4]… Regardless, any name will do for him. And just because he happened to have some understanding of the Japanese language, he called himself 'Puppet Master' while pouring himself sake before me—All right, I have decided. If ye should happen to encounter him while on one of thy 'missions', ye may immediately cut him down without remorse."
"Wouldn't that be problematic for you?"
Mayo giggled at Subaru's point-blank declaration.
"I do not mind. It would make me feel refreshed."
"Now, now, don't say that—then, based on the name Puppet Master, does he sell puppets as well?"
"Not puppets themselves, but rather the service of repairing them. He is like a tinkerer who wanders around fixing pots and pans—Hmm, Suzuran probably does not remember, but he visited once while she was still too young to be fully self-aware. He fixed a malfunctioning puppet during that visit."
"Then… is he the culprit who gave her toys perfect for committing pranks?"
"Indeed." Subaru chuckled and nodded while gazing down at ink brush.
As she quietly listened to Subaru's tales, a cool and collected part of Misasagi Mayo was swiftly analyzing the precious information she divulged and trying to coax out further information.
If this Puppet Master was still alive, he was someone who knew the secrets of Nutella like Subaru, and he might even serve as foothold to reveal the full picture of Nutella in an instant.
—However.

Right now, she didn’t want to break this irreplaceable moment on a silent night.
Even the noise of each breath, like pauses weaved within a silent music score, seemed like songs that struck her heart.
Finally putting her ink brush aside, Subaru shifted in her chair and turned to face Mayo.
“Mayo. Come here,” she said with a gesture to approach.
Slightly confused, Mayo shook her head.
“I can’t interrupt your writing.”
“I can finish it later. Thou must be freezing with that barely sizzling brazier. Come here.”
Subaru took off the blanket over her legs and patted her lap invitingly.
On the floor was a carpet with a strange design, and on top of it was a small floor cushion, likely originally used by Suzuran and left where it was even after her departure. Perhaps the small Hatsuyuki used it now to nap on.
Mayo timidly kneeled down at Subaru’s feet where the hem of her kimono touched the floor and quietly snuggled up to her.
“So the next time ye shall visit will be in the spring.”
“Yes.”
“I see, so it will be some time till we meet again.”
“Yes…”
Subaru gestured for her to come close. She gripped Mayo’s fingers and guided them to her lap along with the rest of her upper body.
“Ah…”
Feeling something like nostalgia in the smooth silk of Subaru’s kimono and the warmth permeating through it, Mayo obediently followed Subaru’s direction.
Subaru placed the blanket over Mayo’s shoulders, warming her body which had chilled more than she’d thought.
—Now that they had completed the big construction work together, Seiran High’s Exploration Club planned to return here in staggered shifts, split between themselves and the Hiyoshizaka High club.
On their next visit, they would finish the base camp to the point where it could actually be used.
Furthermore, they would have the extremely important duty of establishing the transport coordinates for the brand-new Transport Ring that should be completed by that time. It was a new Transport Ring personally created by Doctor Chandra and authorized by UN headquarters.
“If it is fine with thee, I would not mind helping with your ‘base camp’ a little.”
Mayo looked up in surprise at this unexpected suggestion.
Subaru was saying she would finish the remaining fine bits of construction work on the base camp herself.

“No, I could never ask that of you. We will properly secure the site before we depart tomorrow. I believe it will be able to weather through the snow until we resume work in the spring.”
“Hmm. That is splendid display of dedication, but it would serve as a good way to pass the time for me. If it is not a bother, would you allow me to help?”
How much of a relief would it be to accept her help—?
This base would serve as lodgings for investigators from other schools who would eventually visit. It would also surely be useful as a relay point in the expedition mission Kamikoma and her club were going to undertake.
“……”
Unable to say anything, Mayo cast her eyes down and pressed her cheek against Subaru’s lap.
Subaru lovingly placed a hand on her head and kindly admonished her while stroking her hair.
“Mayo, thou brace thyself too much. Some of the younger ones like Homura and Saho-dono are still too childish at heart, but thou should act thy age and relax a bit more.”
After saying that, Subaru’s head drooped despondently.
“It might not be my place to say, though, considering how childish I acted in regards to Ameno. Forgive me.”
“No… I was the one who failed to show proper understanding towards the customs here… I’m sorry.”
“That is precisely what I mean by bracing thyself too much. I said I was in the wrong, so you should raise your head and nose high like a Tengu and be proud of your actions. That is what Suzuran would surely do.”
As Subaru directly felt the breath from Mayo’s giggles on her lap, she continued speaking.
“Mayo. I know that thy mother does not live in the same residence as thee. In his letter, Yoshihiro-dono mentioned how he is something of a widower, and that he has caused much trouble for thee.”
“…My father remarried. My mother is his second wife. She is in good health, but she’s living separately from my father right now. His first wife died without giving birth to any children.”
“So *the child was separated from her parent*, huh? Should not a daughter be sent to live with her mother?”
“Yes. I lived with her when I was young, but I returned to live with father. My mother likely hasn’t forgiven me for that.”
“…Then, oddly enough, we are actually similar… Yoshihiro-dono must be a busy man. Are thee not lonely?”
“There are plenty of maids and cooks who chat with me at our residence, so I’m not lonely. Besides, I have good friends too. I’ve not once thought… that I’m misfortunate. I have a happy life.”
“I am relieved to hear that.”
“…But…”

Mayo grit her teeth and turned her face away for a moment, as if admonishing herself.
But she couldn't hold back the urge which stirred within her and turned to look up at Subaru's eyes once more.
"But… But…"
"Hmm."
Subaru silently listened without rushing her.
"…Subaru-san, the remaining time I can spend with you is very short and limited. I am in my final year of high school. I will graduate in just half a year. When that happens—"
Mayo's following words caught in her throat as her shoulder trembled.
Naturally surmising what she meant to say, Subaru picked up where Mayo left off.
"Japanese law states that those who reach the age of nineteen and complete their higher education must retire from their service as Nutellan investigators, I believe."
"Yes… When that happens, I will no longer be able to visit Nutella. I won't be able to meet you anymore, Subaru-san! We'll never, never—meet again."
"I see… Even if it is a custom ye must obey… It must be hard for thee."
The club's institution strictly stated that Nutellan investigators from Japan were limited to those between the ages of fifteen to eighteen and in the corresponding grades in school.
The main reason was that, once they reached the age of nineteen, investigators all had a rapid decline in their transport success rate, regardless of how high their individual IE Responses were.
The time investigators spent on Nutella technically increased their physical age further compared to their age in Earth years, but this actually tended to decrease the decline in the transport success rate. However, that too had a limit.
That limitation was the very reason why the adults on Earth had to entrust the exploration of Nutella to young investigators.
Once they finished their three-year high school curriculum, they had to graduate.
After three years, their club activities came to an abrupt end and they had to move on to a new stage filled with unknown places and unfamiliar people.
That was surely natural.
But still—
"I, I want to go further. I want to learn more about this planet. I don't need any map. As long as I can go anywhere with my own two feet…!"
For a brief while, Mayo hung her head and made Subaru's lap wet with tears.
Eventually, she lifted her face embarrassingly and spoke up.
"—To me, you're a reward, Subaru-san."
"Hmm?"
Subaru tilted her head in puzzlement while fixing Mayo's frayed hair.

“Meeting a Nutellan princess is a reward for my three years in the club.”
Mayo’s expression was filled with joy. “I’m glad I met you.”
Subaru nodded with a warm, affectionate smile that she only showed to those she acknowledged as family.
“Me too. I am sure that my meeting with thee was guided by my deceased father.”
After saying that, Subaru took out a handkerchief from her sleeve and wiped Mayo’s eyes.
“Your expression is finally bit more like a young girl’s now.”
—A gentle, soothing atmosphere filled the room.
Mayo stood up with a bit of embarrassment and snuggled up to Subaru’s back behind her chair. It was then—
“What’s that—?”
Mayo happened to notice a bundle of documents on top of Subaru’s desk. Unlike Subaru’s other writing materials, this bundle of papers had colorful and comical stickers over them that were clearly made in Japan, so it greatly stood out.
“This? Ah, thou found it. How careless of me.”
Shrugging her shoulders in a somewhat transparent act, Subaru picked up the bundle of stationery paper and print-outs and showed them to Mayo.
“These are all letters?”
Subaru nodded.
“Homura and Touya-dono gave them to me while insisting I keep it secret from thee. They said that these are from other investigators that didn’t come here this time. Oh, how careless of me to have left them in plain sight.”
“Hinooka-san, Touya-kun… Geez, they always act on their own like that…”
Mayo pouted.
“Now, now, do not scold them. Homura and Touya-dono could not say no to a favour for their friends. I still have yet to finish looking over them all. I will not be able to send back replies until thy next visit. By the way, there are some words I do not understand in them, so could I enlist thy aid?”
“…Haah.”
Still frowning, Mayo chose to listen to Subaru’s questions.
“What exactly are ‘three sizes’? I was asked about this in several of the letters. It seems quite important.”
“……”
“And one of them wrote, ‘Please have someone film you riding a broom with a black cat.’ I do not understand this request at all. Does the phrase *delivery service* that was mentioned in the same letter have something to do with mail couriers[5]?”
“I really… really apologize for this…”
Mayo seemed to shrink unto herself as her face turned red.
Subaru laughed and made her raise her head.

“There were other questions too, such as those regarding my likes and hobbies. My favorite modern Rakugo is ‘Chivalrous Nagareyama Zoo’. After I read that book of Rakugo stories, I could not stop laughing for two or three days each time I remembered that one. I do not mind if you convey this answer at least back to them first.”
“…Y-Yes.”
She seemed to be talking about one of the stories in the Rakugo book that Touya had given her during their previous visit.
“In that case, the Rakugo Society might be happy to hear that. The truth is, when we told people that you like Rakugo, a bit of a Rakugo boom started in Japan. There even seem to be some that would like to have you as a star performer.”
“Th… That’s far too august an honor for me…”
It was Subaru’s turn to shrink back. Her exaggerated gesturing from her Rakugo performances naturally came out as she spoke.
“A star performer is a professional master storyteller in Rakugo, correct? Master Rakugo storytellers are the same as gods of entertainment to me. I am far too unworthy of such a title! Truly, I am undeserving of such an honor…”
Subaru actually turned paled as she frantically shook her head.
She then stood up and headed to the brazier to rekindle the fire while beginning preparations to pour tea. Even as she did so, she kept shaking her head.
“It is getting late. Thou should return to thy room. But before that, can I ask thee one favor?”
“What is it?”
Subaru took out a familiar letter from her sleeve and presented it to Mayo.
“The letter from Suzuran…? You still haven’t opened it?”
“……Hmm, well… the truth is… I am slightly… scared…”
Subaru wore a meek expression while holding a steaming teacup in her hands.
“Please, Mayo. Could thou read this letter aloud to me? If not, I feel that I will never open it.”
“Oh my.”
Subaru confessed that the reason she had entered the bath drunk before was because she had just tried and failed to summon the courage to open this letter beforehand.
Mayo sat down on the nearby couch and wore a composed expression, just like when she scolded Homura.
“This is a letter that Suzuran wrote directly to you, Subaru-hime. I think you should read it yourself. Haven’t you already seen pictures of her? I don’t think there’s anything you need to worry about…”
“For mercy’s sake, please do this one favour for me, Mayo—”
Subaru pleaded with her hands clenched together, and Mayo finally shrugged in resignation.

“You really do have a childish side, Subaru-san… Very well. I’ll read it for you.”
Thus Mayo accepted the small letter.
Leaning her shoulder against the frequently trembling Subaru, Mayo opened the letter and silently began to read it aloud.
‘Dear Subaru-sama.
Are you doing well?
I’m I am[6]——’
Chapter 17 END

i wonder if the others are back yet?
hey, it's my turn!

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

(1) The Double Bridge is the famous nickname of the main stone bridge to the Imperial Palace in Tokyo. The nickname comes from how its reflection in the water makes it look like two linked bridges.

(2) This is most likely a reference to the comedic and philandering character Yonosuke from the 1692 Japanese novel “The Life of an Amorous Man” by Ihara Saikaku.

(3) This is an obvious pun, since “Hatsuyuki” literally means “first snow”.

(4) This is partly guesswork, but all these names follow a common “rogue/trickster” theme. Eulenspiegel likely comes from Till Eulenspiegel, a trickster/prankster figure in old German folklore. Falstaff comes from Sir John Falstaff, a comedic rogue character in several of Shakespeare’s plays. Arlecchino is the Italian word for harlequin, a classic comic stock character who acts as a kind of clown-like trickster.

(5) Yes, this is a reference to the famous film “Kiki’s Delivery Service”, though I doubt it needs pointing out.

(6) Here, Suzuran starts by writing ‘Ore’, the male ‘I’ pronoun, which she always used as a childish habit, before crossing it out and writing the more formal and gender-neutral ‘I’ pronoun, ‘Watashi’. In the translation, I simply wrote it as her switching from an informal tone to a formal one.

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